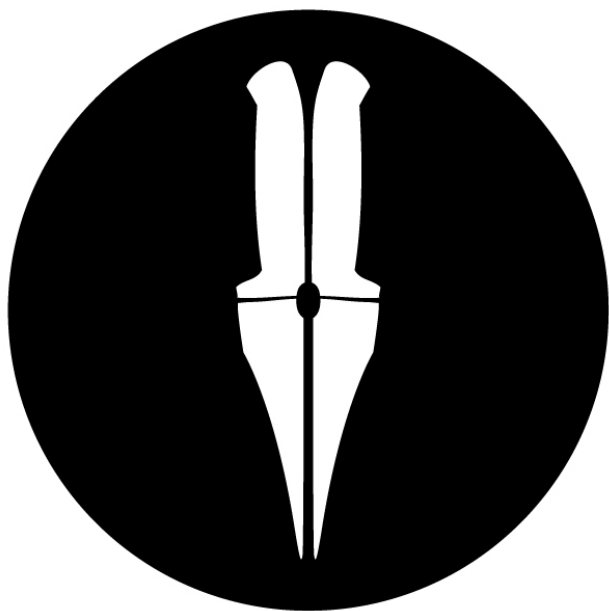


BEST-SELLING AUTHOR
GREIG BECK

MYSTERIOUS
ISLAND:
LEMURIA

— ① —

The Mysterious Island
– LEMURIA –
Book 1



SEVERED**PRESS**

www.severedpress.com

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100,000 years ago, woolly mammoths were widespread in the northern hemisphere from Spain to Alaska. But then a global warming starting 15,000 years ago began to shrink their habitat in Northern Siberia and Alaska.

The ice and snow retreated, the sea level rose, and waterways that were once miles of ice became rivers and seas. Highlands became islands, and one such remote island in the Arctic Ocean became the last outpost for the giant woolly mammoth.

While the mighty mammoths died out everywhere else in the world, on Wrangel Island, they survived up until just 4,000 years ago. That means when the Egyptians were building their pyramids, the mammoths were still striding their last outpost. And these creatures were not the stunted pygmies that ended their existence as being little bigger than ponies but were the 12-foot at the shoulder and 6-ton giants of the distant past.

Sadly, inbreeding and the spread of prehistoric humans finally sealed the mammoth's fate. But it shows us that in our impenetrable jungles, deep caves, remote mountain tops and lost islands, there are places we haven't found yet. And perhaps when we do, creatures even more bizarre or wonderful than mammoths will be there waiting for us to find them.

In a vanished land of promises in a sea of frozen tears.

It is lost, but it is there.

Lemuria – the Mysterious Island

PROLOGUE

1864 – Confederate Army Observation balloon, somewhere over the North Atlantic

“It’s freezing.” Jack Pencroft hugged himself. “And I can’t tell whether we’re over land or water anymore.”

The four Union escapees tried to balance the balloon’s basket by spreading themselves to each corner, and all looked over the side now. Pencroft was right, the mist was so thick it was impossible to make out land or sea below them.

The small group had escaped a Northern prison as the civil war was reaching its climax and had then hijacked a hydrogen-filled observation balloon. It seemed a brilliant plan at the outset. That was until the storm hit.

Then, the hurricane-like winds had blown them for days with their balloon reaching unimaginable heights and speed. At first, they thought they might end up over the Pacific, but the wild wind had instead sling-shotted them north. Far north. And just before they lost sight of anything and everything, they had spotted an iceberg.

Cyrus Smith, a railroad engineer, probably the smartest amongst them, peered over the side gripping the basket’s edge with his two huge hands. “Somewhere over the North Atlantic, I’ll wager. Or maybe even further north than that.”

Pencroft cursed. “We’re not clothed for that sort of cold. We’ll freeze.”

Cyrus looked upwards. “It gets worse; the bag is sagging.”

Gideon Spilett, the journalist, scoffed. “Forget about your woollens, Pencroft. If the balloon loses height and we drop into the water, we’ll be dead in minutes.”

Pencroft’s adopted son, Herbert, made a small whimpering sound in his throat, while Cyrus’ dog, Top, yapped once and tried to get in behind his master’s boots. Cyrus looked down and patted the tiny animal’s head. “Don’t worry, boy, I promise we won’t be swimming for long.”

In the next moment they were able to glimpse something through the heavy fog. And it wasn’t what they wanted to see – a huge wall of ice suddenly loomed before them out of the billowing mist and the balloon’s bag crashed into it first, then swung the basket into it next. All five men and the tiny dog were thrown to the floor.

Luckily the balloon didn’t immediately hit the water and broken ice below them, and instead a stiff breeze dragged them along the edifice for another half hour.

“What’s happening? Are we picking up speed?” Herbert asked.

Pencroft turned, his brow knitted. “Do you feel that?” He turned back. “Warm air.”

In the next instant they came to a huge rip in the wall of ice, and as if a giant inhaled, their balloon was quickly sucked into it.

“Hold on, everyone,” Cyrus called, as the balloon was buffeted along the narrow corridor of dark blue ice.

The light dimmed and then was lost completely as they were then dragged inside some enormous cave, and in moments more the balloon was ripped by the jagged roof and their basket splashed into a large body of water.

“I can see now... up ahead, there’s light,” Herbert observed. “And land.”

“Paddle, everyone, before the basket sinks,” Cyrus urged.

The four men managed to manoeuvre the basket to the beach, and then jumped out to drag it a few feet up onto the sand but couldn’t get it any further with the balloon full of water and acting as a sea anchor.

Top, Cyrus’ dog, bolted up the beach and into the foliage, yapping like a mad thing while the men collapsed on the sand.

“What is this place?” Spilett asked. “It’s like a tropical island.” He looked up. “And are we inside or out?”

Still lying flat, Pencroft turned his head. “Not so warm for a tropical island.”

“First thing’s first. We need food and water. Once we are replenished then we can think clearly and find out where we are,” Cyrus announced. “And what we need to do to get home.”

Pencroft and Spilett sat up and turned to investigate the dense tangle of the forest behind them.

“I think it might be one of the islands of New Zealand.” Pencroft raised his eyebrows.

Just then from the depths of the jungle a deep roar reverberated that made the hair on the men’s scalps rise.

Pencroft shook his head slowly. “On second thoughts, I don’t think this is New Zealand at all.”

Three months later, Gideon Spilett dipped the twig into the cut he had made on his forearm and used it as ink to write another sentence on the tattered shred of parchment he held open with his other hand.

His clothing was ragged, his feet bare, and his only companion was Cyrus Smith’s tiny dog, Top, itself showing ribs.

He stared at the animal. It was still pining for its master, Cyrus. They both had seen the man torn to shreds, and then eaten. Spilett had turned to run, but had stopped to scoop the dog up, to stop it

from heroically but suicidally throwing itself into battle against the monster.

He continued to stare, and his mouth began to water. He was starving, and the dog would feed him for several days if he portioned it sparingly. He closed his eyes and shook his head. Out of respect for Cyrus and the others, he could never do it.

Top whined and Spilett opened his eyes and scratched at one of the numerous insect bites covering his body. The dog also lifted a hind leg to scratch itself.

“Yes, those swamp flies were bad.” He half smiled and then began to nod. “So were the vines.” His eyes opened wider. “And the giant crab that nearly killed us all. Lucky your master used science, his spear as a lever, a rock as a fulcrum, and tipped it over.”

He patted the dog’s head. “We ate well that day, didn’t we?”

His mouth watered at the memory, and he lowered the makeshift quill and parchment to sit back for a moment – they had survived for several months, fighting, running, hiding, but in the end the beasts that lived on this mysterious island were beyond anything he, a man who made a living from working with words, could describe, or even imagine. And eventually the beasts got them, picking them off one by one.

Spilett sighed; he had to try and tell someone, anyone, what happened to this brave and fateful balloon crew. He lifted his parchment once more.

Spilett finished his note knowing that if he didn’t do it now, it would never be done as his life’s candle had just about burned down to the wick. He then rolled the parchment tight, pulled the bottle close and uncorked it. He stuffed the pages in and recorked the bottle tight, and then stood.

“To whom it may concern.” He launched the bottle far out into the water, where it splashed and bobbed for a moment.

Spilett then looked down at Top. “What say we take one last walk along the beach, old friend? See what happens.”

Top wagged his little whip tail for a moment and grinned up at him. But then his grin dropped, and his head whipped around to the forest with its huge fern fronds, curling mist, and deep shadows. He began to growl.

Spilett slowly turned. “Or maybe not.”

A month later the French ship, the *Arcole*, was passing through the northern Atlantic on its way back to France, moving slowly as the wind had fallen away, making their sails hang limp.

The two sailors on deck smoked and talked and had their time filled with too many maintenance tasks ordered by the captain. It seemed

when the wind dropped, their jobs doubled.

Evian and François took a break to smoke and looked over the side at the glass smooth but freezing waters.

“Hey, look.” Evian ran to get the long net. “Hold my legs.”

François did as asked and in another moment, Evian pulled back with a bottle in the net. “There’s a note in there,” he said and prised off the cork.

“I’d prefer rum,” François lamented. “What’s it say?”

Evian glanced at each of the pages and then shrugged. “Can you read English?”

François held out his hand. “A little.” He looked at the pages for a moment and then shook his head. “Bad writing; done with a shaky hand.”

“What have you there?” One of their few paying passengers ambled towards them.

Evian looked up and touched his cap. “We found a note in a bottle cast adrift, sir.” He raised his eyebrows. “Do you read English, sir?”

Jules Gabriel Verne smiled. “Of course. I wouldn’t be much of a writer if I could not be in command of many languages.” He held out his hand. “Give it here.”

EPISODE 01

“Science -- is made up of mistakes, but they are mistakes which it is useful to make, because they lead little by little to the truth” – Jules Verne

CHAPTER 01

25 years ago – Viking Ship Museum, Bygdøy peninsula, Oslo, Norway

Ten-year-old Troyson Strom pushed past his father who only just began to hold the door open for him.

“Hey.” His dad grinned, but Troy fast walked ahead and then opened his arms wide and tilted his head back, turning, and luxuriating in the blessed cool of the interior, a relief after the heatwave outside.

Troy’s cheeks dimpled as he smiled, and his thick dark hair did its usual refusal to be combed, as he deeply inhaled the scents of floor polish, mould, and old wood. It was the first holiday he and his father had taken since his mother passed away just over a year ago. Troy felt the lump begin in his throat every time he thought about her, and quickly shut it behind a memory door, to save it for later and not intrude on this day.

Orin, his father, had brought him back to his homeland, Norway, to show him his roots after being brought up his entire life in America in the quiet leafy suburb of Jericho, New York, because when he had learned he had been descended from Vikings it was the coolest thing ever. And even though his dad made a lot of money doing something in an import-export business between the US and Europe, no matter how much money he made, images of thunder gods, giant wolves, and rune-covered battle axes immediately had it beat.

Troy had absorbed his heritage, memorized it, and spoke about it like he had been born into it. And now he was a mini expert. For the three days they were due to spend in Norway he had requested they see every museum, site, and artefact they could find. And the best thing was, his dad just smiled and agreed.

He left his father behind as he scampered from display to display, using his new digital camera to shoot anything in his path.

“Dad...” Troy pointed to an open door to the next display room.

“Sure, go ahead.” Orin waved as Troy vanished inside to the boat display room. Troy had been busting to see the recovered longboats and other artefacts as soon as he had learned about them.

The first room held the famous Oseberg ship, a well-preserved Viking ship discovered in 1904 in a large burial mound at the Oseberg farm near Tønsberg in Vestfold County. It was not uncommon for chieftains or other high-ranking Vikings to be buried with, or in, their long boats to be of use in Valhalla, their version of heaven.

Troy slowed to take the ship in, marvelling at the beauty of its lines. It was one of the finest, complete artefacts to have survived from the

Viking Era – the 71-foot-long vessel was age-stained a dark mahogany colour even though it was made almost entirely of oak. Scientific testing of the ship suggested parts of it dated from around the year 800, and other parts of its structure may have been far older.

Troy desperately wanted to touch it. To feel the wood beneath his fingers as if his touch would somehow impart memories of those long-gone sea voyages and adventures. He looked around slowly, thinking about it, but an elderly guard nodded to him and smiled, and Troy smiled back, immediately dropping the idea. For now.

He finally walked around the ship once, pausing to stare at some aspect of its design and take a few pictures. But then he ran into the next room that contained works-in-progress and more obscure Viking era artefacts – and there was a reason – there was one that fired his curiosity above all others, and to this day it was still an anomaly amongst the scientific community.

Inside, the dimly lit room was cold, due to temperature control. There were several glass partitions and cabinets, some sealed, that held spot-lit objects that had been recovered over the years.

But the strangest item dominating the room was the partially reconstructed ship behind a wall of shatterproof glass. The remains of a Viking ship, the *skidbladnir*, was unique because it wasn't found buried, or its beams pulled from the depths of a freezing lake. But instead, it was found encased in the center of an iceberg, where it had calved from the melting icefloe, they believed, somewhere off northern Greenland.

It was lucky to be found when it was, as the massive chunk of ice that had entombed the wreck had melted enough to reveal the dragon bow of the crushed vessel – any less melting and it would have remained invisible. And any more, and the remains would have sunk to the bottom and broken down to sludge in a matter of weeks.

Troy stopped and stared as if in a trance. There was only the front portion of the ship recovered and it was still being restored. Even this piece was larger than normal, meaning it was a combination of war ship and long voyage vessel. He already knew what it was, a true *Drekiskip* – dragonship – and he also knew why the traditional bow was decorated with a fierce looking dragon. This one had a single remaining Icelandic jade eye, and in the fluorescent light of the room, the human sized orb still blazed a deep green.

The Vikings certainly knew the power and symbolism of the dragon as it was thought to convey strength and bravery, and a totem to frighten away evil forces. The odd thing was, the Viking era ran for nearly three hundred years, and spanned several countries, with all of them having strikingly similar dragon designs. It was as if they all followed a similar design. Or had actually seen a real one.

Troy didn't need to read the plaque beside the restoration – he knew it all by heart – the frozen ship, the *Skidbladnir*, had been steered by the legendary Ulf Skarsgard, and they knew this because in the wreck's tomb of ice, they had also found a shard of a magnificently decorated clay urn that told the story of his last voyage to some hidden world or island. Or at least part of the story.

He spun at a soft noise; he had expected the room to be empty, but it wasn't.

Young Troy came around the huge, curved sheet of toughened glass and stopped cold. He lowered his camera and stared for a moment.

"Hello," he said softly.

The girl, probably a few years younger than he and with the whitest hair he had ever seen, was staring in through the glass shield at the boat. She didn't turn.

He came and stood next to her and studied her for a moment – as well as the long Nordic blond hair, and a spray of freckles on her cheeks, she had a straight nose with an upward tilt. For some reason just looking at her gave him a funny feeling in his stomach – butterflies, his mom would have said.

Troy turned to also look in at the craft. "Pretty cool, *huh?*"

"It's called the *Skidbladnir*," she said. "Do you know what that means?"

He nodded. "Uh-huh; it means 'wood blade'. For cutting the water. And its captain was Ulf Skarsgard. Ulf was the steer-master, or captain. His name meant wolf."

"That's right." She finally smiled, and turned, looking mildly impressed. "You know a lot. For an American."

He returned the smile but was taken aback for a moment. She had the greenest eyes he had ever seen – or rather, eye – the other one was covered in a pink eyepatch.

"Your eye. Oh..." he said awkwardly. "Is it sore?"

Her smile dropped a little and she turned back to the boat. "No, I, *ah*, lost it. It doesn't matter."

"I don't mind." He shrugged. "And my father is Norwegian, well, born here anyway. We live in New York. I'm with my dad now." Troy tilted his head. "Are you Norwegian?"

"*Jeg er begge – Engelsk og Norsk*," she replied.

"You're English *and* Norwegian?" he grinned.

"So, you do speak a little," she giggled.

Troy liked her laugh. "I can understand it better than I can speak it."

She turned to look up at him. "Yes, I was born here, but my parents move back and forth on business."

"Are they here with you?" Troy asked.

She shook her head, held her arms wide and spun slowly. "I come here by myself. I always do." She dropped her arms and faced him. "My brothers prefer to go fishing, but this is where I like to be. I feel like I belong here."

She became serious again as she nodded in at the remains of the ship. "They say it was found inside an iceberg, in 1869, and the currents in that area could have brought it all the way from the top of Greenland. Look at the *drekahofud*, the dragon eye." She sighed. "It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

He noticed now that the green jade eye was almost the same color as the girl's eye.

"Yes, it's cool," he said. "It almost looks real."

"It is real." She smiled again. "What do you think the ship was doing up there?"

"Looking for something," Troy replied. "Look at this." He waved her over to a smaller case with a single item inside and pointed. "They were looking for a hidden world. An island, I think. It's written on the urn. At least half the story is," Troy lifted his camera. "It's called the Lemuria urn."

She looked back at the eighteen-inch-tall shard of decorated pottery. "A hidden island," she repeated softly. "I wonder what's hidden there."

"Treasure of course," Troy nodded confidently, as he circled the small case, firing off shot after shot.

"And frightening dragons, and sea serpents, it says so." She lifted her chin.

He shrugged. "Whatever. I'm not scared of them."

"Oh, me either," she said fiercely and turned to him. "Elleanor Burgan. My friends call me Ellie or Elle." She stuck out one small, pink hand.

He took her picture. "My name is Troyson Strom but call me Troy." He shook her hand, liking her more, and then nodded to the urn. "One day, I'm going to find that mysterious island in that hidden world."

She stared at him for a moment and then back to the urn. "I wonder what was on the other pieces of it."

Troy bet he knew and walked slowly around the case and saw Ellie's single eye looking through the glass, following him. "Many urns were used to tell stories." He stopped and looked past the shard back through to her. "And this one told the story of Ulf's voyage to the island, and I bet the piece or pieces that are missing showed us how to get there."

She simply nodded; one half of her mouth slightly curved into a smile again.

He came back around the case. "Did you know that there was supposed to be another item found in between the boat planks that has never been on display? It was a giant piece of eggshell. No scientist has been able to work out what it came from – bird or reptile – they could never find a match." He shrugged. "Or so I heard."

"What do you think it was?" she asked, her single eye wide.

He half smiled. "Some think it was from a new species of giant alligator the Vikings had picked up on their long travels in a warmer climate and perhaps they were keeping the eggs for food."

"Alligator? Boring," she huffed.

"But it was said to be too big," he replied.

"Oh?" She turned. "But what do *you* think it was?" she pressed.

Troy could see her staring back moon-eyed, with a hint of fear in her expression. He remembered what else he had learned of the strange shell they had found – he had read in an old science journal that many palaeontologists had suggested its size and shape suggested it was the fossil remains of an unknown, medium-sized saurian, a dinosaur. But the anomaly was dated as being alive at the same time as the ship – around 1,000 years ago. And that was impossible.

However, many other scientists had called it a fake, and it had since disappeared into one of the museum's basement cabinets to probably lie undisturbed for another 1,000 years.

Ellie turned back to the case with the shard in it. "Well, what?" She tilted her head.

"I think it was..."

In his heart, Troy bet that whatever it was, it came from the island that Ulf Skarsgard went looking for. And maybe found. He turned to her and smiled. "I think it was a magic dragon. From a secret kingdom."

Her smile returned. "Yeah."

"I'm going to find the rest of that urn one day," he announced. "And I'm going to read what it says."

"It will tell you where the mysterious island is. And the buried treasure. And the magic dragons," Ellie announced. "And it will lead you to Odin's heart."

"Yes. And then I'll buy a big boat and go there. And I'll be rich and famous," he announced. His smile dropped. *What did she just say?*

"Hey, wait. What's Odin's heart?" He'd never heard of that before, he thought.

"A secret." She put a finger to her lips.

Troy's brows pressed together. "But..."

"Troy." His father came into the room. "Time," he said.

"Coming," Troy yelled back. "*One minute*," he added.

Ellie looked from Troy's dad and then back to him. "Promise me, if

you go there, you'll take me." She began to back away. "*Promise.*"

He grinned. "Okay, I promise... one day."

She rushed back to him with a twinkle in her single, green eye and grabbed the shoulder of his shirt, pulling his face closer. He thought she was going to whisper another secret, but instead kissed his cheek.

"And I know you'll keep your promise—" she said, "—because you're a boy of your word, Troyson Strom. I can see it in you."

"Um, I'll be here tomorrow," Troy added quickly, as his face felt red hot.

Ellie was about to dart away again but then paused. "Hey, do you think anyone else found the island? Since the Vikings, I mean. And went there."

Troy bobbed his head from side to side for a moment. "There are plenty of stories of people finding lost or mysterious islands. But most are just fiction though."

She tilted her head. "You know, I bet people *did* find it. And maybe wrote about it, and we just *thought* it was fiction." She wagged a finger at him. "But I think some legends are real." And then she turned and vanished.

True to his word, the very next day Troy came and stood by the boat. As he stared at it, he daydreamed, his youthful imagination taking him on a voyage to ice-locked continents with dark passageways to hidden seas and a mysterious island.

He was still there 30minutes later when his father came to check on him. He begged for a little more time, but after a full hour he guessed Ellie wasn't going to show. Then he remembered, she never said she would.

It didn't matter, he thought. But he bet she was right, and that some legends *were* real.

CHAPTER 02

Yesterday – Village of Dunnet, Caithness, Highland area of Scotland

“Well, you better git sumthin’ done, Owen, because it’s reekin up the whole place.” Morag McGregor had a tea towel wrapped around her lower face and her hands firmly planted on her hips. “My guests are complainin’ all ta hell.”

Constable Owen McGinley exhaled through his nose and took a deep breath, again through his teeth, to try and avoid the stink of rot. The mound of flesh was a small mountain of greying meat right on the tideline. He could almost see the waves of oily gas coming off it as it rotted in the spring sunshine.

“We could bury it.” He bobbed his head. “*Ahh*, noo, that’s right, I just remembered, Jock has the big digger in fa repairs right now.”

“Well, you’re not just leavin’ it there, I’ll tell you that for nuthin’,” Morag warned. “It’s a public health issue. That’s what it is, it’ll make the wee ones sick.”

McGinley sighed. “Aw, Morag, I really don’t think...”

“It’s poison’n the air. Blow it up,” she interjected.

“It’s just a dead whale or sumthin’,” he frowned.

“Is your bum out the windah? I don’t give a flying feck if it’s Moby Dick’s dick.” She glared. “Blow it up, and then bury the gobbits. *Today*.”

Constable McGinley scratched his chin. “Well, I think Jock does have a wee bit of leftover dynamite.”

“There ya go. Do it. *Today*.” Morag adjusted her tea towel and then waggled a finger at him. “And don’t be comin’ in my pub this evenin’ if it’s not done.”

“Aww.” McGinley looked back at the massive pile of meat that must have been several tons easy. Its size told him it had to be a whale, but it had odd spines and bumps all over it.

Maybe one of those weird Russian ones, he thought.

He checked his watch. “Okay, I’ll turn this big bastard inta cat food. Just for you, Morag.” He touched his cap and headed back to his car.

A few days later, Mr. Blair Findlay, proprietor of Dunnet Curios and Antiques, licked his index finger and used it to turn the page of his newspaper and read with one eye squinted from the pipe smoke that curled up beside his face.

A rapidly cooling mug of black tea was on his tabletop, and he could finally smell the brew which was far better than the stink that

had come from the dead whale. Wasn't much left over the size of a bread loaf when he had gone down that day after the explosion. He chuckled, remembering how that eejit, Constable McGinley, had spread the thing over half a mile and even managed to knock seagulls from the sky with his explosion.

Though it had stunk up the beach and made the tideline an oily mess, he had seen some bits that pricked at his curiosity. He looked up at one of his high shelves at the thing in the pickle jar. Just bits, but interesting bits.

The mid-morning sunshine was just creeping in through the windows of his curio store. It was quiet, again, and fact was, the town was always quiet with a small population of locals and it only being the start of the spring tourist season.

Even though Blair was in his mid 70s, old Mrs Findlay didn't raise fools, and he quickly learned how to use the internet, and then set up an online store, which turned into being able to sell his wares all around the world.

He made good money and rarely had to deal with people in person – and that was the way Blair liked it.

Now, his days were spent photographing the things he found washed up, loading them onto the auction site, and then packaging them up for delivery at the Dunnet Post Office just down the road.

Blair turned the page and read the top political story. He shook his head. "Bastards," he muttered.

He took the pipe from his mouth, sipped his tea, and then jammed the pipe back in between his teeth. He turned the next few pages until he got to the sport section.

His football team had lost. "Bastards," he cursed again.

The small cheery bell over his door tinkled as it opened, and he closed the paper and looked up. A large man, *very* large, in an overcoat and woollen cap pulled down to his brows, stepped inside.

"Good morning to you, sir," Blair said. "Just visiting, are we?"

"Yes," the man replied, not unfriendly, but not friendly either.

Blair noticed he kept his dark glasses on. The young man had a slight Dutch or Finnish accent, and he could just make out the hair under the woollen cap was blond. There was also what might have been a green tattoo just showing at his collar – not one of those lairy types with all the colors, but more home-made looking.

Blair removed his pipe. "How can I help you on this fine day, sir?"

The man reached into his pocket for a folded piece of paper and approached the countertop. He then unfolded it, smoothed it out, and then lay it down in front of Blair.

He tapped it with one large finger. "This piece. I want to buy it."

Blair looked down at his own Internet posting of a shard of faded

Viking pottery. “Ahh, that one. Very popular.” Blair clicked his tongue in his cheek and shook his head. “And unfortunately, sold just the other day.”

The man stood there as if he hadn’t heard.

“Sorry.” Blair shrugged and then grinned. “But as they say, ya should have been here yesterday, son.”

The man turned slowly, examining the small room, looking at the objects in cabinets and on the shelves as if checking to see if Blair was telling the truth. He finally turned his flat-eyed gaze back on Blair for a moment more before leaning forward. “Did you have more pictures of it?”

“I did, sir.” Blair pulled out his new phone. He opened it and went to the gallery and picked a few images. He placed the phone on the desk and turned it around.

“Three pictures.” He showed the first. “This is the...”

The man used his own fingers to enlarge the image. He swiped it onward to look at the next, and the next.

The huge man studied it with the intensity of a jeweller examining a fine gemstone. It was as if he was trying to read the weird markings on it. After five full minutes the man made a guttural sound in his throat and straightened, and when Blair looked, he saw the big lad had his eyes closed behind his dark glasses.

“Are ye all right there, son?” Blair asked.

The man spoke through gritted teeth. “Who... did you *fuckin* sell it to?” he said, low and mean.

Blair pushed the phone to the side. He didn’t like the man’s tone or language and slowly stood. He was an old man now, and the young man was more’n a head and a half taller than him, and two axe handles wide at the shoulders, but Blair had been a fine amateur boxer in his youth, and still had a stiff spine.

“Now you know I can’t give out that information, *sir*.” Blair narrowed his eyes. “Got some other fine pieces. Why don’t you suck in a breath, put your manners back in, and have a look around?”

The visitor was unmoved. “I’ll give you two hundred Euros for the name. I only want a chance to try and buy it back.”

“Doubt she’ll sell it. Seemed right happy with it.” Blair kept a smile on his face, but the tall visitor was beginning to unsettle him.

“*She*.” The man mulled over the word for a moment. “Of course.” He snorted softly and then his eyes settled back on Blair. “Make it five hundred.”

Blair’s eyebrows went up. This guy must really want this piece. He suddenly regretted selling it so cheap.

“Tell you what I can do. You give me your number, and I’ll call the buyer. If sh...*they*, want to sell, I’ll give them your number. Sound

good?" He picked up a pen.

The huge man lay a tight fist on the countertop. Blair tried to ignore it and opened his desk drawer to find some note paper and spotted the recent sales slip for the piece. He reached in and surreptitiously crumpled it tightly in his hand as alarm bells started to ring in the core of his brain.

"But you have her number, yes?" The man's hands dropped into his coat pockets.

"Maybe out the back." Blair's eyes went to his phone on the countertop. It was still unlocked. He reached for it.

Like a snake striking, the man's left hand came from his coat pocket. Something flashed silver, and then Blair's hand was pinned to the wooden desk with the spike blade piercing the flesh between the second and third metacarpal bones.

Blair wailed. The visitor ignored him and left the blade buried in place, pinning Blair's hand to the wooden desk top.

The huge man picked up the phone. "I'm guessing you spoke recently."

He flicked through the phone's log and nodded as he looked down the list of recent calls. He smiled as he must have found what he wanted.

The last thing he did was to change the password before logging off and dropping the phone into his pocket.

He leaned his face closer to Blair's. "If you could go back in time, would you now take my money?"

"*Piss off,*" Blair said through the waves of agony.

Faster than Blair could react, the visitor pulled the blade from the old man's hand and swung it back furiously hard into the elderly Scot's temple, burying it to the hilt.

He held it there as the old man's body jerked and jumped for a moment, before pulling the blade free and standing back to avoid the single, hose-like spurt of dark red cranial blood that was ejected.

Blair's body slumped to the ground. The visitor took one last look around, then went to the door, turned around the small sign to display 'closed' to the street, and then exited to the tinkle of the small cheery bell.

CHAPTER 03

One week later – the Highland area of Scotland

Troy Strom stepped from the black Range Rover SUV and stretched his back. After just missing out on a huge engine parts deal in Edinburgh, he needed to get away to clear his mind.

Fact was he had really needed that deal. His company had just a few orders remaining and cheaper alternatives to his products were eating his new business pipeline by the day. After investing nine years of his life and all his money back into the company he had hit a wall as far as new ideas went.

He exhaled through his nose as an old marketing adage had come back to haunt him: a competitive advantage was not the same as a *sustainable* competitive advantage. Eventually the other guy is going to come at you. And if their product is the same as yours but cheaper, then buddy, your ass is grass.

Ain't it the truth, he sighed.

Troy liked to think of the engineering business as his second life. The clean life. The one he really wanted.

He had graduated college with an engineering degree with honours. But right on campus, he was recruited by the CIA, *the company*. They needed smart young people from different walks of life who could think outside the box, and the world they offered him was exciting and challenging. He remembered he had been swept away by it all. And so, being a spook had become his first life. That ended up turning out to be the dark and dirty one.

Over the years he had excelled at hand-to-hand combat, shooting, and had impressive investigative skills. He was liked and respected by his peers and the same from his superiors.

Some of those years were the best of his life. And some of the worst. Dark mission memories were stored in his mind that intruded during the night.

Troy leaned back against the car and tilted his head back to look up at the pale blue sky. He had been saving people, saving his country, he reminded himself.

Just thinking about it was like a time machine that transported him back. He remembered a joint mission with the British MI6, and the French DGSE, their General Directorate for External Security, both equivalents of the CIA.

They received intel that a potential global terrorist attack was planned. Something big across Europe and the States, and when indicators were that a biological agent was to be involved, it was

enough for them to be given total authority to go in with extreme prejudice.

Shared intel had led them to the Ohio based cell, and it was Troy's job to lead a team in to disrupt them.

The terrorist group had rented a small unassuming house on Garfield Avenue, Findlay, just across from the university. Thermal scanning indicated a group of six men inside. Plus, three drums of an unidentified substance.

There was a similar intervention operation planned to go down in France and the United Kingdom – all were timed to be executed at the same time. The priority was to take out the bad guys without them getting word to the other cells, and before any of them got a chance to disperse the biological agent.

As the seconds counted down, Troy volunteered to casually walk up to the front door. He was dressed in AT&T coveralls and carried a clipboard and tool kit.

He knocked. "AT&T."

"Go away," came the response.

Troy knocked again. "Broadband update. Gotta be today, buddy. It's been authorized."

"No. Go away." The voice sounded right behind the door.

"No can do. Listen, my boss will kick my ass if I don't check off all the Garfield Avenue properties today. Come on, buddy, take me two minutes." Troy knew the guy was looking at him through the door peephole and pretended to look down at his clipboard.

Troy then added the closer. "Otherwise, you might end up losing all your communications."

There was a muffled conversation and then sounds of movement inside and doors closing. It didn't matter, Troy was already familiar with the internal layout and knew where he needed to get to.

In his ear the surveillance team spoke softly telling what the people were doing – secreting themselves in other rooms. Outside there were twenty heavily armed agents, all concealed and ready to go once he had secured the cell's center.

"*Here we go,*" he whispered.

The door was pulled open, and a fiery eyed individual grabbed him and pushed him into the hallway.

"Hey, take it easy," Troy said.

"Hurry; do work and go." He looked at Troy's toolbox. "Wait."

He snatched it from him and opened it, riffling through the tools inside. Troy saw another individual lurking down the hall, one arm hidden, and he bet his last buck the guy had a weapon in his hand. And that was his target room – the one with the drums. He needed to get in there, take down any bad guys, and defend it to the death or

until the team busted in.

The toolbox was closed and slammed into his mid-section. "Okay, go."

"Gee, thanks." Troy walked down the hallway until he got abreast of his target room.

He dropped the toolbox. "Oops."

As expected, their eyes went to the fallen tools, just for a second, and when they looked back, Troy had a gun in one hand and knife in the other.

First to go was the guy in the doorway, with a clean shot to the forehead. In the same few seconds, he slammed the blade back into the throat of the guy who let him in. He then went into the room hard and fast – it was darker in there, and the drums were all lined against the back wall, all wired together, and a small detonation box on top, its light showing green, for now.

But there was another guy inside, with a gun, who on seeing his partner drop and Troy headed in fast, reacted by firing a blizzard of rounds at him.

Troy took a hit to the trap muscle at his neck-shoulder junction but ignored it and fired twice, hitting his target both times. But fanatical determination and velocity kept the guy going to the detonation button. So, Troy dived to intercept him.

He had only slivers of seconds before the others in the house entered the room and turned the odds well away from him. He collided with the guy, knocking him away from the controls, and then jammed his gun into the guy's ribs and fired twice, just as the doorway filled with the three remaining house occupants.

"Bad guys at the gate," he said into his throat mic.

The three terrorists screamed their fury, but in their haste jammed themselves up in the doorframe. Troy lifted the body of the guy he had just taken down and used it as a shield just in time when several rounds smacked into the dead meat.

Then the front door exploded inward as the cavalry arrived, and a hundred rounds shredded the three guys in the doorway. Nothing remained except a bloody mist and curling gun smoke.

Troy let the bullet riddled body drop and immediately felt the adrenaline leave his body making him feel lightheaded and nauseous. He bent over, sucking in deep breaths.

His team joined him, slapped his back, and lifted him to his feet. The medic checked him over, and pronounced the wound painful, but non debilitating. A few days in the Bahamas and a couple of beers and he'd be as good as new, his friends had joked.

They were the good times, Troy thought and smiled as the Scottish sunshine bathed his face. Yeah, that day was a good one for the good

guys, he remembered. And a few wins like that put him firmly on a fast path to the stars in the agency.

But then came the darkest day. The day one got through the cracks and derailed him.

“Nope,” he said aloud and refused to think about it.

Troy jumped back in the car and continued for the last part of his journey. It might be his last trip for a while, or at least the last he could afford, so he had decided on a driving holiday up to one of his favourite places in Scotland – it was a 240-mile trip up the A9 and through Inverness, to the top of the island at Thurso, and then a quick flick across to the tiny village of Dunnet, in Caithness, in the Highland area of Scotland.

The landscape here was emerald-green, and always cold, but the small houses were as warm as the locals’ hearts – Troy’s mouth curved into a smile – just like their pies and beer.

This was what he really loved doing – running down obscure items that fed his obsession with Lemuria, the mysterious island of Viking legend. Ever since he was a boy, Troy’s love of the Viking era had been undiminished, and he had accumulated quite a collection of iron-age Viking artefacts, and he always came away with something interesting from this area. Especially from Dunnet, where an item that had fired his imagination had appeared online at old Blair Findlay’s curios and antiques store.

The images of the broken shard of pottery Blair shared online were too good to be true, and if it was what he thought it was, he just had to have it. Even as an adult he still daydreamed of finding the mythical Lemuria. His head told him it was all nothing but a legend. But his heart whispered it was real. After all, some legends are real, someone had said to him long ago.

He sighed; the problem was, Blair wasn’t answering his calls.

Troy slowed as he spotted his home for the next few days – the Northern Sands Hotel adjacent to the village church. Just a dozen rooms, a low-ceilinged dining room, a small friendly bar, and him walking in usually doubled the crowd size, but that was all fine by him.

The town was extremely old and being on the wind-swept coast meant things had been washing up from the North Sea, the Labrador Sea, and the Norwegian Sea for thousands or perhaps millions of years.

Where Troy was staying was right on the coastal edge and from his room, he could look south out over the softest carpet of jade colored grass one could lay their eyes on. And then, when facing north there was the sparkling ocean, bone chillingly cold, but deceptively inviting.

Right now, it was low tide and the sand plain extended for five

hundred feet to the water – this was why beach combing was so rewarding – things were pushed in on the waves, the tide went out, wa-*aaay* out, and they stood out on the white sand like choc chips on a snow cake. Then you just rolled up your jeans and strolled down to pick them up.

He asked the hotel owner, Morag, if Blair was coming in that night, and she told him that they hadn't seen the old rascal in several days and assumed he was off on one of his seashore hunting tours where he could drive along the coastline and travel so far, he ended up sleeping in his van.

It was still early afternoon, so Troy grabbed his thick coat and scarf and headed down the road to Blair's curios and wares' shop on the main street to see if he was back.

At the door he saw the closed sign and was about to turn away when he noticed the greasy condensation running down the inside of the glass.

Odd, he thought.

He cupped his eyes and looked in through the window. It was hard to see through all the moisture. Usually, the only thing that would steam windows up like that was a running bath or a kettle boiling close by.

He went to turn away but paused – there was one other thing that steamed a room up, and that was one he knew from his agency days. It was this one that worried the hell out of him as Blair hadn't been seen in a while.

Troy changed his viewing angles and looked closer; sure enough, the condensation was more than water, and looked to contain oil or grease. Another bad sign.

He knocked, waited, and then pounded on the door. There was no response. Troy then tried the handle, and found it locked. He looked around for a moment, but as expected the street was empty, cold, and the afternoon sun now weakening.

What the hell? he thought. If he was wrong, he'd leave Blair a note and some money for a new lock.

Troy put his shoulder into the door. He was a large, fit man, and it didn't take long for the wooden frame to splinter and the lock tongue to tear through the old wood. His entry elicited an incongruous tingle of a small bell.

"Oof." He threw an arm over his lower face and didn't need to call the man's name as the stink told him all he needed to know.

Troy pulled his scarf up around his mouth and nose and stepped in – the air inside was thick with a humidity that blended methane, decaying fat particles and water vapour that all clung to the skin. His experience told him this was the 'fog of death' that penetrated the

fibers of the clothing worn by rescue personnel so much that sometimes the garments had to be destroyed as no amount of washing could remove the smell of a rotting corpse.

It didn't take him long to see the tip of a boot sticking out from behind the large desk Blair used as a counter and he crossed to it quickly.

"Shit." Troy saw that the old man lay on his back, eyes wide and milky, his skin translucent and waxy, and his head glued to the floor by a pool of dark and still sticky blood.

"Ah, Blair, my old friend, what the hell happened here?" He reached up to brush the old man's hair from his forehead. He saw the puncture wound in the temple, and as he took another look over the body, spotted the old man's hand also had a hole punched right through it.

There was no burn mark or gunpowder speckling, and the wounds were clean indicating a stabbing instrument like a thin stiletto – an assassin's tool – from someone who had come expecting violence.

The other hand was curled tight and then he saw the slip of paper protruding from the closed fist. He pried open the hand, eliciting a few cracks from the shortened tendons in the fingers, and he pulled free the crumpled scrap.

Troy unfolded it and saw the sale's slip – it was a name, number, and a description of the item – *the urn shard* – the one he wanted to buy. He guessed Blair got a better offer.

Troy looked at the name; just a surname and first initial - E. Kristiansen, and a sale price of 200 euros – a good sum for a broken shard of pottery. But he knew he would have paid twice that, no, ten times that, if it was what he was seeking.

He stared at the note. Why did Blair have this as the last thing he hung onto? Did the person who killed him buy the urn, and he was trying to send a message?

Can't be, he then thought, as the slip was dated over two weeks ago, and Blair looked to have been dead for around a week. *So, someone who came after then.*

By opening Blair's hand, Troy knew he had already disturbed evidence. So, removing it was only one tiny step further – he tucked the note into his side pocket. He stood, knowing he needed to bring in the local police.

He still had an uneasy feeling that one way or another, this is what got him killed. And if not this, then what? Did Blair find anything else?

He looked around and spotted a large jar up on a high shelf. Amongst all the driftwood, boat pieces, and lost fishing buoys, it was the only thing that didn't fit. The jar was around ten inches tall and

six inches across and filled with something pulpy suspended in yellowing liquid. Troy reached up and used one hand to turn it to see into its milky depths.

There was a provenance note tucked underneath it, maybe to jog old Blair's mind when asked. Troy read: *fragment found washed up 12-March. Strip of skin taken from partial rotting carcass. Possibly some sort of whale but looked all bony and lumpy like an alligator or something.* Troy scoffed as he read the last sentence: *Blown up by the coppers.*

Troy lifted the jar down to examine it up close. It was a roll of skin, now a blue-grey color with the meat bleached white and fraying. Blair was right, it was unlike a whale's skin in that it wasn't smooth, and instead had bony projections – scutes – he remembered they were called.

He frowned in at the thing. "What the hell are you?"

He carefully unscrewed the top. "*Damn.*" He turned his head and quickly shut the jar, screwing it tight again. His eyes watered from whatever Blair had used as a preservative, and he blinked to clear them.

Troy thought for a moment more and then also slid the jar into his coat's large side pocket. He then went to pull his wallet and leave some money behind for it when he paused. Him being there was one thing, but cash with his prints on it might lead to awkward questions.

He tucked his wallet away. "I'll send flowers to your funeral, old friend."

Troy then returned to the hotel, and on entering, Morag's beaming smile fell away when she saw the expression on his face.

"Call the police, quick," he said and undid the scarf from his neck in the overly warm front room. "It's Blair; he's dead, *murdered.*"

CHAPTER 04

A90 highway, outskirts of Edinburgh City, Scotland

Troy's mind tormented him as he headed back into Edinburgh. He felt sorry for old Blair, being alone and helpless when he was murdered in his shop, and even though he had asked Morag to keep him updated on the police investigation, he bet they'd never find out who had been behind the killing.

Based on his experience in the company, it all just seemed too professional, and not a robbery gone wrong, a crime of passion, or even a lone psycho.

He had also missed out on obtaining the shard of urn he had been seeking for years. And he also had the sinking feeling that the piece of 1,000 year old Viking pottery might have been the cause of all the chaos.

Damn, he thought. It just made him want it more and he was pissed at missing out. He banged the steering wheel with his palm; his business, his life, his dreams, everything was going to shit, he thought angrily.

But the events had sure cleared his senses – he had previously wondered if the shard of pottery was the real missing part of the Skarsgard urn. Well, someone probably thought so, and it meant one or more people had wanted it as much as he did. No, it meant they had wanted it more, and enough to kill for.

And that led him to believe one thing: “The mysterious island of Lemuria is real.”

That very idea made him feel light-headed with excitement, and he knew it would make him more obsessed with finding the secrets of the lost island than ever.

At the next set of traffic lights, Troy stopped the car and glanced at the jar in the box on his front seat – at least he had something – and it would still make an interesting curio for his collection.

Troy lifted the large jar free and held it up. He shook it. He already doubted it was crocodilian, as the bony ridges, or scutes, seemed too large and prominent. He had heard that the giant sturgeon in Russia could grow up to 25 feet and weigh in at 3,500 pounds. And they had prehistoric-looking ridges down their back and sides that resembled teeth – he squinted in through the murky liquid – a little like on this thing.

He had no idea what it was, but he knew someone who might. Years back he had dated a researcher, Anne Walsh, at the national museum of Scotland in Edinburgh, and it was close to his hotel.

Anne had told him of her work in paleobiology and how they had collections that were renowned worldwide for their specimens of eurypterids, fossil fish, and early tetrapods that were among the most diverse in the world. It had meant little to him at the time, but he guessed she'd be perfect to give him some insights, or at least point him in the right direction.

If she still talked to him, he mused.

The lights changed and he put the jar back in its box. In just minutes more he turned into Northbridge Road and then pulled into his hotel, The Scotsman. The magnificent old establishment was a new hotel in an old building, and though it wasn't the best in Edinburgh, it had huge rooms, a great outdoor restaurant, and the biggest indoor pool he'd seen in Scotland. And they greeted him like returning family.

Troy stepped from the car and handed over his keys. All he needed to do was carry his odd-looking jar of brackish-looking fluid with a flap of lumpy meat floating inside, and then grab his key.

He immediately recognised the girl at the desk and she him. "Jenny." He smiled as she looked critically at the concoction under his arm.

Troy placed it on the counter. "Barbecue tonight."

"I'm envious already," she said with her beautiful Scottish lilt and then stuck her tongue out in a mock gagging response.

He chuckled. "I do need your help with something." He pulled the jar closer. "Can you have this hand delivered for me?"

"Of course." She smiled. "Where to?"

"Put it in the hands of Ms. Anne Walsh at the National Museum of Scotland." He quickly scribbled a note to go with it, thought about what else to tell her, wrote some more, and then added his room number. "Charge it to my room." He handed her a 20 euro note. "And that's for you."

"Thank you, Mr Strom." She peered in at the sample, her nose wrinkling. "I'll see to it right now."

Troy took the key from her, and was about to turn away, when she called.

"Oh wait, there's a message for you."

"For me?" He frowned. "Who knows I'm here?" He took the small envelope, saluted her with it then headed for the elevator.

Probably more bad news from his failing business. He sighed and once inside the carriage he opened the note and read.

Always keep your promises.

His brow creased. The writing was cursive and perfect. He sniffed, detecting something, and lifted it to his nose. He smelled a hint of perfume. *Nice*, he thought.

Troy turned it over and examined the envelope but there was no more information or clues as to who or where it came from. He briefly smelled the perfume again and then tucked it into his pocket. *Maybe sent to the wrong person*, he guessed.

Troy opened the door to his room, spotted his bags stacked neatly against one wall, and checked his watch – it was still only 2:00pm, and he had one important phone call to make back to the States. Now was a good time zone overlap and he sat on the edge of the huge bed and dialled.

He listened as the phone made the connection and his heart started to race – this was it, the last big deal in his shrinking pipeline. McKenzie Car Rental was a huge deal for his company, and he had previously sold them 50,000 energy converters. And they were coming up for renewal and replacement.

The first time round it had been a huge deal, and this time, in today's money, was set to be an even bigger deal. He had a good relationship with the owner, Jim McKenzie, and hoped the guy would green light the upgrade.

But the red flag and the cause of Troy's disquiet was that Jim had been distant and had refused to catch up for a recent dinner which they had done many times over the years.

The call finally connected, and it was Jim, but by the tone of his voice, Troy noticed the usual bonhomie of their past conversations was missing. He listened with a sinking heart as his doom was laid out in a few moments.

Yes, Mackenzie was upgrading to 50,000 new converters. But just not with his company. Troy asked what the commercials were for the opposition bid, hoping for a chance of detecting some levers he could pull to give him a win-back. But Jim's sobering response was, he would need to cut his bid by more than half to even be in the same orbit.

Troy sagged; he couldn't go that low. It'd bankrupt him. It's one thing to go out of business. It's another thing to go out owing millions to the bank and his employees.

Jim waited, but Troy declined to put in a counteroffer, and then after a few pleasantries, and seconds more of awkward silence, they agreed to remain friends, and rang off.

Troy felt a brooding depression and the fatigue of his long drive dragging him down as he kicked off his shoes and fell backwards onto the bed.

"And that's that," he sighed and closed his eyes.

He probably spent an hour trying to think of other options, but there were none.

Or rather, there was one. A dark one. And then his mind opened the

door on that darkest day. The day one got through the cracks and derailed his life in the CIA.

When not on assignment, the agents were on general threat assessment – threats against the country, politicians, places, and just ordinary people, were usually numbered in the tens of thousands – when they got a lead, they had little time to run it down. Individuals or groups were identified on a propensity risk basis. Depending on threat level, resources were allocated for immediate intervention. Or they were placed on a watch list. And if they were deemed low risk, they were just dropped.

One of Troy's threat candidates he had assessed as being just a wannabe loud-mouth had turned out to be so much more. Back then, they didn't have the sophisticated algorithms that could scour the web and pick up identity linkages – what people don't realize is that their writing style is as distinctive as a fingerprint – one alias could be linked to another in seconds. But back then it was all by line-of-sight and gut-feel.

They never knew that the kid had another, secret, online alias where he had been learning how to build a backpack bomb, which he would fill with nails and ball bearings, and then go to a local senator's campaign rally.

He never got near his target, but the public was crowded in real close that day when the blast happened – six people were obliterated, dozens more were ripped to shreds, and countless others were traumatized forever.

The internal investigation concluded that anyone could have missed the clues this time. But the harshest critic of Troy, was Troy, and he resigned. How could he go on, knowing that a blink-of-the-eye distraction could mean he missed another one? And then good people died, badly.

He shook off the dark clouds forming in his mind and ran one hand up through his thick dark hair that still refused to be combed. That was eleven years ago. He had picked up his engineering, and using his family home as collateral, had started a company creating solar conversion units for, firstly cars, and then trucks and boats. It was a huge success. At first. And now it was dying; he just couldn't compete with someone building the same product, same quality, for half the price.

Thing was, if Troy really needed work, there were plenty of ex-CIA guys who had jobs for him. But they were off-the-book jobs that paid well and went from doing little more than acting as a bodyguard for some low life, all the way up to *wet-work*, where a single take-down could bring in fifty thousand bucks.

He sighed, and thought, *he wasn't there just yet.*

He groaned and decided to shift his attention away from business and turned his mind to something to lift his spirits. He thought again of the legend of the mysterious island and sorted through what he had learned, and what he had missed. Maybe the urn shard would turn up on an auction site, and he should keep a lookout for it. And maybe whoever killed Blair would be doing the same.

He ground his back teeth. He just hoped he had the chance to run into him – see how that murderous bastard went coming up against someone who wasn't a frail old man.

Troy exhaled and sunk deeper into the soft bed and warm room, and in seconds more he couldn't help falling into a deep sleep.

But his slumber was tormented by dreams of old Blair being stabbed, and then of Vikings rowing a longboat along a frozen, mist shrouded shoreline, searching for the entrance to a hidden world that was an island sitting in the middle of a warm sea.

As they approached a cave of ice, something inside roared, and twin eyes like burning coals stared out of the darkness. It lunged at him.

“Jesus.” Troy sat up and rubbed his face.

Outside it was darkening and glancing at the side table clock, he saw three hours had flown by.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed, and still felt tired. He could easily have lain back down and grabbed some more sleep, but knew he'd probably wake at around 2 or 3am fully rejuvenated and with nothing to do.

He contemplated his options – room service and a movie, or maybe shower and head down for some drinks and dinner at the outdoor restaurant.

“Get off your ass, you lazy bastard,” he said to the empty room. *This'll probably be, no, definitely be, the last time you'll be here. Or at least, can afford to be here,* he thought. Troy shuffled into the bathroom for a shower.

Twenty minutes later he was dressed and felt invigorated, and as it was 6pm, he booked dinner for 7, with time for a few relaxing drinks in the bar, he thought.

Troy took one last look around and wondered if his jar of mystery had arrived at its destination yet.

“Enjoy my monster soup, Annie.” He headed for the door.

EPISODE 02

“In the presence of Nature's grand convulsions, man is powerless” –
Jules Verne

CHAPTER 05

The Denmark Strait, between Iceland and Greenland – aboard the Arctic Princess fishing vessel – today

“Maybe they’ve all flown south for the winter.” Jorgan Nilson had the field glasses to his eyes but lowered them to turn and grin.

“Only if they’re flying fish.” Bjorn Burgan grinned back.

“And it’s not winter,” Elrik Burgan replied.

Elrik was the ship’s captain and Bjorn’s older brother. The pair, as well as Jorgan Nilson and Astrid Johansen, the designated veterinary officer, were all crammed in the ship’s wheel room.

Elrik’s eyes were bleary from watching the water; this time of year, they were usually teeming with mackerel, capelin, Atlantic cod, halibut, as well as 250 other species of fish. And now, nothing. Something was amiss.

“Flown south, no, should be the opposite,” he replied. “Global warming was supposed to mean more fish migrated further north towards Greenland waters.”

“So where are they?” Bjorn asked.

“That is the question, isn’t it, little brother?” Elrik slowed the Arctic Princess, mid-sized fishing vessel, to around 3 knots and leaned out the side wheelhouse window to stare out over the cold, steel-grey waters. “Because they’ve gone somewhere, that’s for sure.”

“Scared off?” Jorgan asked. “Maybe a pack of killer whales, that’d do it. Astrid, what do you think?”

She bobbed her head. “Maybe, but killers are extremely rare in these waters. So, I think something else.”

As well as the four of them in the wheelhouse, the Arctic Princess had a crew of eight, and fished using bag nets in mid water. They were also one of the few designated boats permitted to take seals, and only then were they allowed to hunt them with rifles, and from the boat, and they had to be over 1-years old. Meaning no clubbing doe-eyed white baby seals ever again.

In addition, they had to have a veterinary officer accompany them to ensure no seals suffered. Hence one of the reasons why Astrid was with them. But as Bjorn and she had a bit of a thing going on, she was usually onboard if they were taking seals or not.

“What about a few hooded seals, they can be 400-hundred kilos, easy.” Jorgan’s eyebrows went up hopefully. “We could take those.”

Astrid bobbed her head. “Maybe.”

“Do you think the melt has affected the fish?” Jorgan had the glasses to his eyes again. “Never seen so much open water. And we see

more every year.”

“Possible,” Astrid replied. “The melt would put a lot more fresh water into the sea and maybe the fish stocks had a problem with it. And if it happened quickly then I’d agree that could do it,” she said without turning. “But this melt has been slow, over many decades. Most fish species would surely adapt to it.”

Elrik scratched his chin. “Okay, we’ll take it in a little closer to the coastline. Might be some mack in the shallower water. Jorgan, get your rifle; if we see any big seals, we take ‘em. We’ll go home with something.”

Astrid grimaced. “Elrik, that’s Greenland’s coast; a little out of your allowable hunting zone.”

“Just going to have a look.” He winked. “No harm in that. Besides, this area is uninhabited, and no one comes here.”

“No one *used* to come here, because they couldn’t get here,” Bjorn scoffed.

“And in six months’ time they won’t again when the ice sheets extend out once more,” Elrik replied.

Bjorn pointed. “Look, it’s all opened up now.”

“Lucky us then.” Jorgan lifted an arm to point through the cold mist, navigating a path through the smooth, and bone-numbingly cold water. “That way – through the fog.”

The boat was slowly navigated in through the bobbing bergs, and Bjorn squinted through the heavy mist. “Why is it always foggy around here? Any time of the year, day, night, whenever; it never lifts.”

“It’s always been like this,” Elrik replied. “Do you know what the elders used to call it? Dragon’s breath.”

“More like another side effect of warming,” Astrid replied. “But fog usually forms when either warm water, or humid air, meets a cold atmosphere.”

Elrik scratched his chin. “And just where would warm humid air be coming from around here? Other than from a dragon?” He winked.

No one could think of a good answer, so they continued in silence for another half hour until they moved into a large open area of water. The sonar and radar crackled and began to white out.

Jorgan cursed. “Ack, we’re losing our eyes and ears. And we can’t damn well see in this mist.”

“The Russians,” Elrik seethed. “Probably using some sort of jamming signal.” He handed Jorgan a pair of large binoculars. “Stick your head out and tell me what you can see.”

The younger man leaned out the cabin window to the side and then adjusted the binoculars. “Hey, hold it, hold it. Got movement – fish jump.” Jorgan craned forward, both hands on the field glasses.

“Mackerel, big school,” he crowed. “Never seen them right on the surface like this. Something’s scaring them up.” He turned to waggle his eyebrows at Astrid. “Those invisible killer whales again.”

Astrid looked out of the window; her forehead creased. “Then where are they; the whales?”

“As long as they stay away from our nets, I don’t give a damn.” Elrik picked up the microphone and called the deck crew to action.

In minutes more, he and Bjorn had plotted a large circular course as the mid-water nets started to be fed out behind the boat.

Elrik watched the water while Bjorn tried to read from the sonar that kept coming in and out as interference continued its assault on the instruments.

“The school’s clumping, or...” Bjorn frowned. “There’s something bigger down there feeding on them. Can’t see clearly as this damn machine is freaking out.”

Elrik could see the fish break the surface now and then, but also spotted the occasional boil of bubbles – something else *was* down there – and it was an air-breather – Jorgan might have been right about those whales after all.

Elrik slowed the boat and lifted the radio to direct the deck crew to feed out the nets in a curling loop over a thousand feet around; he’d allow it to sink to a hundred feet and then begin the task of hauling them back in to close the net like a gigantic bag.

“Cutting the engines,” he said.

The boat glided into a drift. The Arctic Princess was an older, but large and solid, fishing boat, running at eighty feet from bow to stern and she still cut the water like a knife.

“Bjorn, take the wheel.” Elrik pulled his cigarettes from his pocket and stuck one in his mouth. “Not sure what else is down there, but let’s hope we don’t end up with just a bag full of pissed off seals.” He offered Astrid one, but she shook her head.

“Need me?” Jorgan asked.

“Nah, you stay warm and toasty. We’ll do all the work,” Elrik chuckled.

“I was hoping you’d say that.” Jorgan threw a small salute.

Elrik and Astrid stepped out of the wheelhouse cabin and walked along the railing. He lit the thick cigarette and leaned on the gunwale to watch the crew bring the nets in while Astrid folded her arms tight in at her body.

Elrik drew in a lung full of hot smoke and stifled a cough. He knew that a full net of mackerel or cod meant they could fill their hold and head home early. Even half full was good as then they could decide if they wanted to continue to set the nets for another run only if they wanted. But an empty net, or a low-grade catch, meant more fishing,

more work, and more expensive fuel burned. And that pushed his ledger into the red. Even *more* into the red.

The crew worked hard and fast and in no time, the machinery was engaged, and the nets came in, hauled by the enormous winch that could drag in thousands of pounds of soaking net and fish at a hundred feet per minute.

The nets came in fast, and to begin with there were a few mackerel, cod, halibut, and other midwater species. Not enough. Elrik blew a plume of smoke as his confidence began to slip away.

But as the massive net bag fully closed in the depths there was a groan of steel and the winches complained like an old man getting out of his favorite chair.

Elrik straightened. *Snag*, he thought. *On what?*

The deck crew yelled orders as the net lines went taught and began to ping water like piano wire. Then the boat began to be dragged backwards.

“What the hell?” Elrik turned to the wheelhouse and cupped his mouth. “Bjorn, back her up, *now*.”

“I’m on it, I’m on it,” Bjorn shouted back and put the Arctic Princess in reverse.

Elrik knew that the large and powerful ship was in no danger of being swamped, as not even a whale could do that to them. But they had gathered up something in the nets that wasn’t just a snag but seemed to be fighting back.

Elrik turned to Astrid and scoffed. “One of those damned invisible whales again?”

“Or something,” she replied.

Finally, the winches won the arm-wrestle and began to bring the line in a few feet, then more yards, and then it was coming back smoothly. But Elrik noticed it was still taught.

“Whatever we netted is still in there. All stop,” he yelled and Bjorn shut down the engines.

“*Jorgan*.” Elrik waited until his friend leaned out from the wheelhouse door. “Bring your gun.”

The man ducked back in and reappeared seconds later holding the rifle.

“Don’t shoot it.” Astrid ran after them. “Whatever it is.”

Elrik’s mind turned over about what it could be. He didn’t think it was a humpback, finback, or bowhead, as they were big enough to rip right through the nets. But it could be a narwhale, or maybe even a minke – now those still had commercial value. The meat, oil, skin, even the teeth could be sold.

Finally, the nets came all the way in, and the winch crane strained to lift it over the side. His nets were synthetic twine, and the winch

cables were threaded wire so were tough enough to handle any fish load.

Elrik couldn't drag his eyes away as something made him apprehensive about this catch.

The deck crew stood ready with their gaff hooks to sort the fish, dressed in thick coats, slicker pants, rubber boots, and heavy gloves to guard against the freezing seawater.

As the bag came over the side, still draining water, Elrik saw that instead of the flapping of hundreds of fish, there was something large and coiled inside.

"What is that?" Astrid breathed.

"Something's not right." Elrik flicked his cigarette away and came down the steps from the upper deck just as the bag was about to be released to the deck.

"Wait..." he yelled.

Too late; the nets were opened, disgorging their catch to the slippery deck. Elrik stopped dead.

Sea croc, someone yelled in a high-pitched voice. That made no sense at all, he thought. We're too far from the shoreline and even then, he'd heard you might get them in the waters of northern Australia where they can venture miles from the coast, but not here, never here.

The nets were lifted away, and the thing unwound itself and lay on the slippery deck. It must have been thirty feet long with a powerful body, flippers, and a bony, wedge-shaped head full of teeth.

"That's not a whale." Astrid began to walk forward as if in a trance.

Elrik grabbed her back and could only stare at the thing with his mouth hanging open. The weak sunlight on its back made the scales shimmer, but they were not like those of a fish but were diamond-shaped and they were raised up, like armour plating. To add to its bizarre form, it had a long, scythe-shaped tail like that of a shark.

Not a crocodile. A sea dragon, he thought insanely.

It hissed and snapped its jaws at the closest man. Its four paddle-shaped fins weren't built for land, but it decided it had had enough and went for the side of the boat, and actually walked on its paddles.

"Don't let it get away," Elrik screamed and scrambled for his phone camera.

Jorgan raised his rifle. "Say the word."

"Don't shoot it," Astrid yelled back.

The deck crew yelled, cursed, waved their gaff poles, and one man, Oddvar, brought a harpoon they had for over-attentive killer whales, and attempted to jam it into the thing's side. As he did, it hissed, like an angry steam train, and that description was apt, as it looked like steam rose from its mouth and nose.

The thing was hot, *warm blooded*, Elrik thought.

Oddvar went to give it a little more encouragement, but it was ready this time and rounded on him faster than he could get out of the way.

He threw an arm up to protect himself and Elrik held his breath as the three-foot long wedge-shaped head opened like a giant bear trap, and its head darted forward like a snake. With a sickening, bone-crunching sound it clamped down on Oddvar's raised arm.

Oddvar screamed as his eyes bulged. The massive creature jerked its head to the side and ripped the entire arm free in a rooster tail of blood.

Screams, panic, torn clothing, and blood and flesh covered the deck making it greasy, adding to the chaos.

Steam rose from the wounded man's stump as hot blood met freezing air. Elrik kept recording as he knew what he was witnessing was unbelievable, and without a record it would remain that way.

"*Elrik!*" Jorgan yelled.

Trance-like, he continued filming. "*Huh?*" He turned to look at the man with a gun pulled in tight at his shoulder, and then back at his boat's deck awash with blood and gore, screams, and his crew bravely fighting with the thing – and they were losing – it snapped him back to his senses.

"Yes, *shoot, shoot.*" He nodded furiously.

Jorgan fired, and the bullet struck the thing's torso, and it turned its wedge-shaped head toward him. Tiny, devil-red eyes glared at them for a second or two, and steam came in twin jets from its nose. Then with one mighty flick of its muscular tail it went over the side.

The 80-foot boat rocked as Jorgan slowly lowered the gun. Elrik gulped, his heart galloping like a small horse in his chest.

"Treat that man," Astrid yelled, more to herself, and ran to assist the wounded crewmen.

Elrik wiped a hand over his face. "Clear the deck and secure the nets," he said softly.

"What the hell was that?" Jorgan asked, as he looked out over the now placid, dark water.

"A sea monster." Elrik sat slowly on the steps.

"But, from where?" Jorgan frowned as he scanned the water's surface.

"The place where all monsters come from." Elrik closed his eyes. "Hell."

CHAPTER 06

The Scotsman, the front bar, Edinburgh City, Scotland

Troy stood in the doorway of the bar, taking in the ambience of leather chairs, rows of multi-coloured liquor bottles, and warm scents of cologne, perfume, and beer.

A few women turned to size him up. Troy was six-two and knew he had inherited his father's strong jawline, thick dark hair, and a pair of ocean storm-colored eyes he was told a woman could fall into and drown.

The women continued to stare, all except one at the bar who had her back to him but had a fantastic figure, short white hair, and the tattoo of a long dragon on her shoulder and running down her arm.

He headed to the bar.

"What'll it be, sir?" The barman placed both hands on the bar top.

Troy looked along the row of bottles. "Pint of Belhaven Ale, and...." he decided, "...a double shot of Glenfarclas."

"Excellent choice and coming right up." The barman sped down the bar to first pull the beer.

Troy thought he'd treat himself to the 40-year-old matured whisky. It was smoky, peaty, and as deep and rich as Mother Earth itself.

The beer came first, and he sipped the crisp, dry lager, and then came the dark liquid in the crystal tumbler. The small tumbler, roughly a third full, cost him 60 Scottish pounds, roughly 80 bucks. *What the hell, his trip was over, everything was over, plus he'd be heading home tomorrow.*

He took his drinks to a table and avoided any of the smiles from the denizens of the bar and glanced around. The mysterious woman was engrossed in reading something. For some reason, everything about her intrigued him.

He saw that her drink was nearly empty, and as the barman went by collecting empty glasses, he held up a hand. "Excuse me."

"Yes, sir." The man paused.

"The lady at the bar; can you get her another of whatever she's drinking? On me." He smiled.

The barman half smiled and then shook his head. "I would sir, but she has left instructions not to be disturbed, and has already seen off several interested parties."

Troy shrugged. "Okay, got it, thanks." He didn't see a wedding ring on her finger, but that didn't mean she wasn't the other half of a loved-up couple.

He continued to examine her; the dragon tattoo she wore looked to

be a Nordic design. He already knew that Nordic Mythic Dragons usually represented powerful forces of destruction and evil.

The woman moved a little, and her dress slid a little to the side displaying more tattoo – he squinted – runes this time.

He smiled, liking what he saw and wanted to know their history. But damn, she had placed a fence around herself.

He sighed. His entire trip was turning out to be a lot of missed opportunities. He turned away from the girl. *So be it*, he thought.

Troy checked his watch, 20-to-7, and enough time to finish his drink and head in for dinner. He gave the woman one last look as she lifted her reading material to turn a page.

His brows snapped together. *What the hell?*

He rose to his feet. Regardless of what the instructions were he walked toward her trance-like and as if he was compelled. His eyes never left her document and he found himself standing behind her, staring down at it.

“It’s rude to stare,” she said in a voice that held just a hint of a Dutch accent.

She had lifted her head and was now facing the bar, and he followed her gaze. In the mirror behind the lined-up bottles the woman looked back into his eyes with her own pair, dead level.

“Sorry, I just...” He pointed at her book. *“That.”*

“Yes?” she slowly swung around on her stool.

Her eyes were near luminous green, and he found them mesmerizing. He continued to point at her book. “The Lemuria urn at the museum. I know it, I’ve seen it. Or at least half of it.”

“Lucky for you. For no one else ever will.” She smiled. “Because it’s been stolen.”

“What?” he frowned. “When?”

Troy knew the security was light at the museum, as it was an obscure artefact, and probably only had value to a few in-the-know collectors and none of them would chance a fine or jail time to steal it.

But then again, what he suspected was the missing piece just got someone killed – so some person or people thought it had life or death value.

“It was stolen five days ago,” she replied evenly.

Down the end of the bar, the barman dried a glass and watched them with a small smile.

“Ah, this is going to sound weird...” Troy began, “...but I was just trying to obtain the long missing piece of this urn. But someone beat me to it. And now the first piece goes missing? This is too much of a coincidence.”

“Why did you want it?” she asked.

“Because it told a story.” He scoffed softly. “Or rather completed a

story.”

“Hmm.” Her mouth turned down momentarily. “Then I wonder what the story could have told us? If the urn was put back together.”

He half smiled. “Wondrous things, I’ll bet.”

“Of a hidden world? Maybe even of Lemuria itself.” She turned back around to face forward again, but in her reflection, he saw her eyes were still on him.

Troy looked at the profile of her face. Really looked at it now, and thought he recognised her; it was something about the eyes. “Have we met before, miss...?”

She finished her drink. “Elleanor, Elleanor Kristiansen.” She held out her hand and there was a small smile on her lips and her eyes twinkled.

A light went on in his head. “You.” He pointed. “You bought the shard.” He fumbled for his phone and called up the picture he had taken of the sales docket. He frowned. “E. Kristiansen – the ‘E’ is Elleanor.” He turned it around to show her.

She nodded. “I see old Blair couldn’t keep a secret if his life depended on it.”

Troy drew his arm back. “Yeah, I think his life did depend on it; he’s dead.”

This time it was her turn to be shocked at the revelation. “What? How?”

“Murdered. I found him. Just two days ago.” He sat down. “Stabbed to death.”

“Bastard.” Her brows momentarily drew together, but then her expression softened. “Poor Blair.” She shook her head. “I had no idea. He was nice.”

“You want to know what I think?” He ordered another drink. This time she let him buy her one. They waited until the barman left. “I think whoever killed him wanted that shard. Because they now have the first piece.”

“But they didn’t get it, did they? Because I did.” She turned to stare at him. “And before you ask, I had nothing to do with Blair’s death.”

He nodded. “I guessed that. Why would you kill him? You purchased it weeks before he was killed. At least according to the docket.” He sighed and lifted his drink. “But whoever came after you missed their chance. And if they wanted it enough to kill Blair, then I doubt they would have given up so easily.”

Troy looked over the rim of his glass and into her eyes. “I think they’ll come looking for you, and worse, that they probably already know who you are.”

She tilted her head back. “Then they will head to my home. In Norway.” She smiled. “And I am not there, am I? Because I am here.”

"You need to tell the police," Troy said.

"And tell them what? To look out for, who exactly? And maybe they'll say: we need the urn while we investigate. And lock it up for a year. Or worse, the fragile piece is destroyed by rough handling. So, not a chance." She shook her head. "But what did they tell you about old Blair?"

He sighed. "Not much more than I observed. But I didn't tell them everything."

"About the urn?" she raised an eyebrow.

He nodded.

"About the missing section and why you wanted it?" She smiled.

He nodded again.

"About the mysterious island of Lemuria?" Her eyes were on his.

"No." His mouth turned down momentarily. "Why would I? It would be meaningless to them. Besides, it's just a myth."

"Is it?" She had a twinkle in her eyes again. "I don't think you believe it is."

Or at least one of them. *Must be the light*, Troy thought.

"It was supposed to have been a place that Odin sent warriors to be tested before they could enter Valhalla," she said. "To prove themselves worthy. Do you know the legend?"

"I do." Troy didn't have to search deep in his memory. "In Viking mythology, when a warrior falls in battle, male or female, they are lifted up by the Valkyries and carried across the rainbow bridge to Asgard where they will join Odin in his great hall and await the All-Father's call to the final battle of Ragnarök."

He had memorized it by heart. He went on: "But there is more to the legend. In times of no war, or no invasion, in those times of peace, how were warriors to gain entry to Valhalla? Well, according to the myth, Odin pondered on this, and then in his wisdom decided to create a place of great beauty and great danger and called it Lemuria." He sipped and continued.

"Odin then cleaved asunder the mountains of ice and dug a hole in the land of Groen and the water poured in. There he made a secret island and placed his still beating mighty heart at its center to act as a beacon for the warriors to be drawn to." Troy toasted her.

Elleanor picked up the story thread. "Only the cleverest would find Odin's mysterious island. And only the bravest would survive it. Those few would then be found worthy of sitting in his hall."

"Very good," he said.

She raised her glass and toasted him back. "Thank you." She sipped and put her glass back on the bar. "This hidden land, Lemuria, was said to be such a fearsome place that Odin hid it and placed mighty walls of ice around it. And a gate of ice to lock it in."

“Odin’s Gate,” he finished. “You had to pass through it to get to the island.”

“You had to find it first.” She rested her chin on her hand. “And even if you think it’s all a myth, which I know you don’t, it seems someone else certainly doesn’t think so and is on its trail.” She lifted her eyes to his. “But whoever it is only has one part of the urn. And one part of the puzzle.”

“As do you,” Troy replied.

“Then we are at stalemate.” She tilted her head. “Are we not?”

“For now.” He shrugged. “Maybe it’ll come up for sale on the black market.”

She smiled. “After all these years, you still want to go there. You want to sail to the hidden island of Lemuria and find your magic dragons.”

His brows knitted a little, as he saw that knowing twinkle in her eye again. “I do. I said that when I was a kid.” A sneaking suspicion began to enter his thoughts. “To a skinny little girl in a museum. Ellie was her name. And I think, Ellie Bor, Burg...”

“Burgan, Ellie Burgan.” She lifted her glass. “And she’s been waiting for you to keep your promise for years, Troyson Strom.”

Always keep your promise – that phrase, written on the note left for him at the hotel. He straightened. “You left me the note at the hotel. But, how did...?”

“How did I find you? Come on, there’s not that many Troyson Stroms kicking around and you’re on the business registry.” She toasted him. “It was easy.”

“And Burgan became Kristiansen. You have family somewhere?” he asked.

“No, I mean not anymore. We’re long separated.” Her eyes took on a faraway expression for a moment. “He was a good man, at least in the beginning. But tended to violence.” She sat back. “But we settled our differences, and I walked away well provided for.” She smiled again. “So, now you will keep your promise, and we will find this hidden world called Lemuria. Together.”

“Because you now have half an urn?” he asked as he finished his drink.

“Half. Yes.” Her lips curved at the corners. “Do you know I was thinking of stealing the other half myself? I should have. I could have saved it.”

He laughed, believing her, and liked her even more for it. He noticed again that one of her eyes did not contain the *life* the other did, and suddenly remembered why.

“Your eye,” he remarked. “That little girl I met told me she had an

accident.”

“Well, an accident of nature. It happened at birth.” She smiled. “I was born with only one eye. They told my parents there was no reason for there not to be an eye, but for some reason, my body seemed to have forgotten to plug one in.” She raised an eyebrow. “Was it the pupil that gave it away?”

“No, sorry for mentioning it,” he replied, feeling like a heel for bringing it up.

“I carry two; a daytime version, and a night-time one with a larger pupil.” She sighed. “But transitioning from a light room to dark is a giveaway.”

“It looks very good. Beautiful.” He meant it.

“Thank you.” She turned away.

They sat in silence for a few moments until Troy leaned on the bar, facing her. “You didn’t track me down just to tell me you had the Lemuria urn shard, did you, Elleanor?”

“Elle will do. And no, I didn’t.” She faced him. “Things all seem to be falling into place. I believe Lemuria is about to be revealed again, maybe accessible for the first time in a thousand years.”

She looked up at him. “Did you know that this is the warmest it’s been in many centuries? And in the summer months the seaways are just as open now as they were when the *Skidbladnr* and its crew went in search of their mysterious island. That time then was called the Medieval Warm Period and coincided with the rise of the Vikings.”

“I heard that. Seems we’re in an interglacial period, and in the summer season, the ice pulls right back to expose some land and waterways we haven’t seen in many centuries. We had a brief melt lasting a few decades in the mid 1800s as well,” he replied, staring intently at the intriguing and beautiful woman.

She nodded. “The last few decades it has been happening again – things are thawing out, opening up, and being revealed. Maybe even Odin’s Gate is now open.” She looked up at him. “Someone just needs to look for it.”

“And know *where* to look,” he replied. “If it’s real.”

“The urn would tell us, wouldn’t it?” She half smiled.

“If we had all of it.” He twirled his drink. “It’s an interesting legend – the home of treasure and dragons.”

“Dragons.” She snorted softly. “I would think any strange and unusually large reptile or beast might be thought of as a dragon to Norsemen. Did you know that in Australia there was a creature called a Megalania, like a Komodo dragon but three times as big and heavy? It was alive just 12,000 years ago, when there were early people down there. It was a monster and undoubtedly preyed on humans. So, to them, dragons and monsters really existed.”

“Frightening thought.” He finished his drink. “But they’re still not what I think of as a dragon or what the Norsemen carved into their boats.”

She held up a finger. “One more thing to think over.” She sat forward. “Odin’s Gate might now already be open. And do you know what usually happens when a gate is left open?”

“People can enter?” He raised his eyebrows.

“Sure, that’s one thing.” She pulled out her phone. “People can enter. But also, people, and anything else in there, can get out.”

She opened her phone and rummaged through her files for a moment. Finding what she was looking for she laid it down on the bar and started a video playing.

“My brothers own a fishing boat; they sent me this.” She tapped the phone. “This is what really fired my imagination.”

“I remember; your brothers who like to fish.” He leaned over the small screen. “What is it?”

“Watch it, then you tell me.” She rested her chin on her hand again as she watched him.

Troy saw there was a video paused on the screen, and he tapped it to begin.

There was foreign writing preceding the clip that he thought might have been Dutch. It was confirmed when the voices started. It had been years since he had the chance to use the language and was a little rusty.

The film began with a full fishing net being hauled over the side of a mid-sized commercial boat. The film zoomed in on it, and it was clear that what it contained was something heavy, but moving sinuously, rather than the frantic flip-flapping of hundreds of silver fish.

The net opened and disgorged its contents to the deck. Not fish but instead a single thing. And whatever the thing was, it unfurled itself.

At first Troy thought it was a shark, then a giant oarfish, then some sort of barracuda, and then he had no idea because wherever they were fishing looked far too cold for any of the species he suspected.

The creature was long in comparison to the men standing back at the gunwale, perhaps thirty to forty feet, with an iridescent blue-grey scaling on its back, but a pale belly – it was the camouflage of an ambush hunter – invisible from above and below.

Then the thing seemed to realize its predicament and became agitated. It reared up and hissed, its long triangular head splitting open like a V-shaped bear trap revealing an outer row of sharp, conical teeth.

Men screamed and cursed. The camera wobbled, and the creature unfolded a scythe-like tail. Troy’s eyes widened as he beheld the huge

creature fully exposed – he was sure he'd seen pictures of something like this before, and many a lot bigger.

One of the deckhands poked at it with a spear and the creature spun at him, and in a blink, tore the man's arm free. Steam rose, and everything went mad on deck.

"Oh my god," he whispered.

There came gushing blood, more panicked shouting, then a gunshot rang out, and the creature flipped its powerful tail, sending men and equipment flying. And then it was over the side and gone.

The film ended. Troy sat motionless, staring at the small screen.

"Well?" Elle asked softly.

He backed up the film and stopped it at the creature. His mind worked furiously, but it was like there was some sort of short circuit in his brain.

She put a hand on his arm. "Troy?"

"*Huh?*" He blinked away the reverie. "Nope, no way. Impossible. Fake."

"Really?" She sat closer. "You think it wasn't real?"

He handed her back the phone even though a small part of him wanted to watch the film again, and again.

"They can do anything with special effects these days." He half smiled. "Even amateurs are faking everything from the Loch Ness Monster to Elvis Presley strolling through the local shopping mall – have you ever heard of something called a deep-fake? I'd ask your brothers who shot it and sent it to them."

"Hmm, interesting." She took the phone but left it on the bar top. "Because I took the trouble of having the film verified and even sent it to the Ichthyology department at the University of Copenhagen. Those guys spend their lives studying everything about fish biology including anatomy, behavior, and evolutionary pathways."

She smiled up at him. "Do you know what they said?"

He shook his head.

"They said it might be a mutation. But then recommended I send it to their paleontology department. To their dinosaurian experts." She raised her eyebrows. "I wonder why?"

Troy laughed softly. "Okay, I'll bite; what do you think it was?"

"I think it was a Sjøorm; a sea serpent." Her eyes turned hard. "And I already know who shot the footage. My brothers, and they are eyewitnesses. And they tell me the truth." She put her phone away. "Want to know what I really think?"

He shrugged. "Sure."

"Looks to me like dragons and sea serpents have just made a reappearance in our world." She smiled, confidently.

He half smiled. "If I was a kid, I'd eat this stuff up." He drew in a

deep breath. "But things have changed now."

She smiled. "I don't believe that, Troyson Strom. And I know you don't either." She turned back to the bar.

Elle sipped her drink, once again staring straight ahead at her reflection in the mirror. She spoke softly. "There, Odin made a secret island and placed his still beating mighty heart at its center to act as a beacon for the warriors to be drawn to."

"*Hm-hmm*, the legend of Odin's heart," he replied. "I looked it up after we first met."

"But do you know what exactly that still beating heart is supposed to be?" She tilted her head, her brows up.

He waited.

"A ruby." She smiled. "The size of a man's head. Of perfect clarity and of a pure, vibrant red, like a fine blood-wine."

"I've never heard that part of the legend." Troy listened intently.

"It was written in 1003 as the dying words of Erik the Red, the Viking who they say founded Greenland. It was the last time the gate was open." She tilted her head. "I have another question for you; do you know what the world's most expensive ruby is?"

He shook his head. "No-ooo."

"The Jubilee Ruby, weighing 15.99 carats, sold for \$14.2 million, which equates to \$885,000 per carat."

Troy whistled.

"But now, think of a flawless ruby weighing between one hundred and one-twenty carats." She sipped her drink. "Well, you do the math."

He thought for a few seconds. "Around one hundred million dollars." He breathed. His heart beat a little faster; for even a share of that he could refinance his entire business.

Elle stood, and for the first time he noticed how tall she was at about 6 feet. A small smile curved Elle's ruby red lips. "The gate is open, Troyson Strom. Probably for the first time since Ulf Skarsgard passed through it. Time to find your mysterious island, Lemuria. And your treasure."

"For the first time in a thousand years," he whispered and lifted his eyes to hers. He nodded.

CHAPTER 07

Year of 1020 – The last Voyage of the Skidbladnr to the Mysterious Island

They'd crossed frozen seas. Passed through veils of mist so thick it was like gauze drawn over the eyes. They had entered cursed caves with invisible beasts that dragged men to their death. And then they had found their Lemuria. But no one rejoiced. No one even spoke. Because it was a place as cold as the grave with death everywhere.

Chieftain Ulf Skarsgard, who was descended from Ragnar Lodbrok, the 9th century legendary Viking hero, and who was known for his ferocity in battle, ordered camp made as the twilight grew to night darkness. The shadows became deeper, but the movement within them never ceased.

Njal, the warrior with shoulders as broad as a horse's girth, took a small hunting team out into the forest and brought back a beast the size of a large hog. But instead of bristled hairs over its hide and a flat snout, the thing had scales and a mouth something like a hard parrot's beak.

The men dared not risk a fire, so carved the flesh from its bones and ate it raw. But it was a dour meal as the flesh was unpleasant, and once the blood drained from it, it was the color of fowl meat, and tasted like bad fish.

It didn't matter, they all ate as their bodies were starving and already worn down just from the few days trekking through the thickest forest Ulf had ever encountered on any land.

Many times, they had needed to backtrack or skirt some of the beasts they had seen. Even though Ulf had a band of thirty strong and battle-tested warriors with him, the creatures were like moving mountains and he doubted their hide could be pierced even with the strongest arm and the sharpest weapon.

They had already lost one good man; Isgar went off to piss and never came back. Brynhilde and a team went looking for him but after a few hours she came back and just shook her head. He was gone, and Ulf doubted he wandered off by his own choice.

He looked again at the huge woman and felt his spirits soar and his heart grow full of courage. With the green dragon tattoos circling Brynhilde's muscled arms and in stripes on each of her cheeks, she was as tall as most of the men, and had her long white hair in braids strung with jade and animal bones. Over one eye was a leather patch, where she had lost it in battle. He half smiled. She was one of the most ferocious warriors in battle he had fought beside. He knew she

would make a fine wife and breed strong bairn for him.

But now she sat silent just off from the group, her only movement the constant movement of a whetting stone over the edge of her blade, making small circles, nearly soundless; and her eyes were on it but were unfocussed. She was with them, but not.

The men murmured softly. It was too early for sleep, as if any could safely achieve that in this place.

Ulf held up his heavily calloused hand with the green orb in the palm. It still pointed to the center of the island – tomorrow they hoped to reach Odin's heart, leave their tribute, and honour their god. And then they could return home, assured that upon their death they would have a seat in the great hall to await the All Fathers call to the final battle of Ragnarök.

He snatched the orb away; a hundred feet further in the dark forest there was the noise of a tree being pushed over. Perhaps the smell of the meat had attracted a beast. The men slowly got to their feet. Brynhilde gripped her long blade with both hands, her eye now focussed and blazing. All waited in silence, some even holding their breath.

No, there would be no sleep this night.

EPISODE 03

*“The earth hides our mistakes, our secrets, and our treasures. But only
for a while.”*

Greig Beck

CHAPTER 08

Coastal town of Vejle, Jutland, Denmark.

Guus Sorenson was operating the backhoe attachment of his tractor as he dug into the hillside. The soil wasn't so hard this time of year, and he guessed he had another thirty minutes digging before the hole was deep and wide enough to accommodate the basement level slab for the new house.

Sorenson worked the multiple gear sticks and extended the backhoe's arm to drag in another scoop of soil. He was halfway down the cut when the bucket struck something hard, and the vibration and accompanying *clang* went right through the cabin and all the way to his back teeth.

"*Ach*, what now?"

He quickly pulled the mechanical arm back. Of course, there was rock in the ground, but he immediately knew it was larger than the occasional boulder.

He switched on the cabin's spotlight and reengaged the arm to gently reach forward and gently scrape the bucket down the wall of dark soil to get an idea of what he had to deal with.

The soil flaked away and this time he saw what it was the bucket's teeth had hit – it wasn't just a large rock, but instead a wall of flat interlocking stones. And it looked as old as time.

"What do we have here now?" Sorenson grabbed a flashlight and slid from the cabin. Up close he saw the wall clearly and the writing on the stones. He used his palm to wipe soil from the exposed portion of the wall and his mouth spread in a grin.

"*Viking*," he whispered.

There was money to be made here. If there were artefacts, they commanded a high price. Even the stones with their old Norse writing had value. But the biggest prize would be if there was something behind the wall.

He went back to the cabin of his tractor and pulled free a crowbar and strode back to the wall. He could have used the bucket on the digger to push the wall down, but it might topple inwards, and he didn't want to potentially damage the writing stones, or anything behind it.

It took him fifteen minutes to dig around one of the stones and push it in. Then the others were easier to remove.

Sorenson stopped and shone his flashlight into the void and inhaled. Sorenson's first impression was of a smell of stale air and dank soil, and he squinted into a darkness that seemed as endless as space. He moved his light around inside the small stone room.

“Yaa!” His light beam wobbled from his shock as he illuminated the seated figure staring right back at him with its grisly hollow sockets.

Sorenson swallowed in a dry mouth and stepped back to the hole. He narrowed his eyes as he stared in at the skeleton. It was large, and with the remnants of a fur cloak around its bony shoulders.

The ancient dead man was in a long boat but seated on a throne with a magnificent iron helmet on the head, and with long, white hair escaping its sides. Surrounding the bones were all manner of weapons, and he bet they were silver with jewel encrusted handles and maybe even inlaid with some gold thread.

The man must have been a famous chieftain indeed. But that meant if he told the historical society, like he was supposed to, they would fence this entire area off and claim everything for themselves. Added to that, the new home site didn't belong to Sorenson, so, he had a claim to nothing. Just how would this discovery help a struggling builder? he wondered.

Sorenson was a patriotic Dane, and respected the Viking culture, but surely if he took a single piece, it wouldn't be missed. After all, if it wasn't for him, this chamber would never have even been discovered. And for that, they owed him, he decided.

He moved the beam of his light around a little more, deciding what he should take. Then he saw it: beside the seated figure was an axe.

It had an unusually long and thick handle and with a double-bladed head, smaller than normal, but by the way the metal head still shone in places, he bet it was solid silver. It was undoubtedly a ceremonial blade.

Iron weapons were greatly valued by collectors. But silver was up another level entirely. That would be his payment.

He couldn't advertise to sell it or even tell other locals. But he did know someone who would buy it. A huge man had come into the pub a few months back and let it be known he was looking for Viking artefacts.

The bearded man had stood a head taller than anyone else in the room and looked as mean as a rent collector's dog. On his arms and neck there were traditional green tattoos that looked to have a life of their own. He had written a number on the wall, and said he'd pay top money for the right pieces.

Sorenson began to pull out more stones, and in no time stepped into the dark space. He grinned and lifted the weapon; the axe would have a new home by tonight. And he'd have a nice little bit of pocket money for his trouble, he thought.

He was about to turn away, but something made him turn back and he swung his light beam around the dark, dank room. He then lifted it toward the far wall, past the seated figure.

“Mother of God,” he breathed.

It was a painted fresco, its colors still vivid and it was also covered in runic writing. There was a Viking ship in full sail on an ocean with bergs. The next image showed a wall of ice dwarfing the ship, but at its center was a dark ice ravine.

Sorenson moved his beam to the following one showing the ship entering the massive crack in the ice. There was writing but he could only draw forth a few words here and there and most he had no chance of reading. The second to last image showed the ship passing through the cavern of rock and ice and heading to an island in a calm sea. Strangely, the painted sky seemed to be either low clouds or ice.

Then came a drawing of an island with mountains, waterways, and areas of thick forest and towards its center was a place marked on it with a red heart. It was a crude map, and underneath, there was one word that he could read – *Lemuria*.

“Magnificent,” he said and wished he had brought a camera.

The scientists would love this, he thought, and probably worth more to them than a single axe.

Sorenson lifted the heavy weapon. Everyone would be happy. But first, he had a sale to make.

That Friday evening, Guus Sorenson called the number on the wall of the bar, explained what he had, and the deep voice told him to stay put and he would be there within an hour. Sorenson was buoyed that the man was coming so quickly – it meant he really wanted the artefact.

True to his word, within an hour he had arrived. Outside, the guy was easy to spot standing in the shadows as he was a broad-shouldered giant and much bigger than Sorenson remembered; suddenly he felt less confident he could push the man into a hard bargain.

“Show me the axe,” the giant growled.

Sorenson handed it over.

The big man looked at the axe – from one side then the other. He hefted and then swung the heavy weapon as if it weighed nothing. Then, oddly, he held it to his ear and knocked on the wooden handle and listened. He smiled for a second, but then let it fall away. “Interesting, but unremarkable,” he said. “What else have you got?”

Sorenson shrugged, feeling a little deflated. “In the tomb was a skeleton, furs, helmet, some other weapons, a few paintings on the wall.”

“Of what?” The man stepped closer.

Sorenson bobbed his head as he remembered. “Of a voyage. To somewhere called Lemuria.”

The man froze and his eyes narrowed as he listened intently.

Sorenson nodded. "Yeah, it was of a Viking ship sailing into an ice ravine. Oh, and there was an island, plus a lot of ancient writing I couldn't read, except for that one word."

The man now stared at him with eyes widened to the point of bulging. "Take me there."

Sorenson sighed. "Not tonight, I..."

The man shot out one large hand and grabbed the front of Sorenson's shirt and lifted. Sorenson's toes left the ground. The giant pulled his face close to his own just as another patron came out of the bar and stood staring.

The giant saw him and he lowered Sorenson and smiled gently. "Sorry, I get excited and do not know my own strength. Anyway, I have decided to buy your axe. How much do you want?"

"Five –" he coughed, "– seven hundred euros." Sorenson smoothed his shirt down.

"A lot of money." The huge man's beard lifted as he smiled. "But I will give you your seven hundred, for the axe, and another one thousand, three hundred for showing me the tomb. Tonight."

Sorenson thought about it as the guy scared him a little. But two thousand euros was a big payday and would solve a lot of his problems. He decided.

"We have a deal," he said.

An hour later the huge man was before the mural, arms wide as if absorbing the tomb's images into his soul.

Guus Sorenson stood by the entrance and watched. He had a bad feeling about this guy, and now thought bringing him might have been a mistake. He was clearly unbalanced or some sort of religious nut.

"What was lost, will be found." The giant slowly lowered his arms and turned. "The heart of the All Father calls me to Lemuria." He pointed. "And he shows me the way."

"That's nice." Sorenson tried to look interested. "Now, if you just give me my money, our business is done." He grinned nervously. "I will be going soon, but feel free to stay. Just be gone by Monday morning, okay?"

The giant ignored him and lowered the axe to rest by his leg and took out his phone to begin photographing each of the pictures on the wall.

After another moment, Sorenson cleared his throat. "Hey, the axe and the visit? 2,000-euros, remember?"

The giant finally seemed to hear. "The axe?" He lifted the ancient weapon, and turned it over in his hands, examining the blade for a

moment. "You keep it." The giant flung the axe, expertly, and it spun once in the air and the heavy blade penetrated Sorenson's sternum, splitting the ribcage, and sliding deep into his heart.

Sorenson sank to the ground unable to breathe or feel his legs. He quickly grew cold and looked up as the giant stood over him and his mouth behind the beard turned down.

"You're nothing but a worm, a pissant robber of graves." He put his boot on Sorenson's gut and wrenched the axe free with a sound of crunching bone and tendon. "You're not worthy." The giant turned back to look at the images again.

Sorenson felt himself grow colder and his world shrunk to darkness.

CHAPTER 09

National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh – Palaeontology Research Department.

Anne Walsh closed the door after the courier departed, pulled the note from the package, and began reading. She stopped in her tracks.

“Really? Troyson Strom, *pfft*, you must be joking.” She turned the scribbled note over, but the other side was blank. Turning it back she read it more carefully as she sat down and carefully placed the heavy package on the desk.

Something to intrigue you.

Any answers are welcome.

Your friend, Troy.

“*Friend?*” Anne’s lips pressed into a thin line. The last time she had seen her *friend*, he had promised to call after they had hung out as a couple for several months, just a year or so back. She had decided to play it cool and wait for him to make contact. But then the next thing she knew her supposed boyfriend was back home in America. So yeah, that playing it cool thing worked out well for her.

She glanced at the odd shaped thing. “Somehow, I don’t think this is going to be a big bunch of flowers,” she muttered as she placed it on her desk and peeled open the wrapping.

She had suspected it was fluid by the way it moved in the package. Anne shoved the wrapping aside and pushed the large jar back a few inches. She then lowered her chin to the desk and peered into the milky liquid.

Her brows came together as she tried to make sense of what she was looking at. Anne quickly slid open her drawer and extracted a flashlight and shone it in at the meaty flap.

She stared, her mind working. She snatched up a sharp letter opener on her desk to cut the sealing tape and lift the lid.

Damn, she thought. It was soaking in formalin, made from a mix of formaldehyde and water. It was cheap and worked but was usually destructive to genetic material. Professional preservers in museums or labs used ethanol, as it didn’t affect DNA integrity and that meant later analysis could be carried out at the genetic level.

Anne stood and crossed to a desk that had a few of her tools of the trade in a box and rummaged for a moment before pulling a pair of long nosed forceps, some scissors, and a small glass dish – she changed her mind and replaced the dish with a longer silver kidney pan instead.

Crossing back to the jar she carefully lifted the blue grey scrap of

flesh and lay it in the dish where it unfurled, outer skin side up. She straightened, resting her hands either side of the sample and just stared down at it.

“What are you?”

After another moment she still had no idea what she was looking at – on one side the flesh was pulpy and ragged as it looked to have started to decompose before it was submersed in the formalin. But on the other, it looked a little like crocodilian tissue. But she knew it wasn't.

She prodded the bony extrusions with the forceps; they were firm and rock-like and definitely not shaped like anything she recognized.

Anne knew the process from here – if they couldn't sight-identify the sample, they needed to deep dive into the DNA. And even though it had been soaked in the formalin, if there was one guy who could see through it, it was Martin O'Keefe. And he was working downstairs right now.

She used the forceps and scalpel to extract a small square of the flesh and placed it in a large test tube. The rest went back in its jar.

She was about to leave when she paused, grabbed her bag to open it, took out a small lipstick and gave her lips a once over. She then headed down to the Molecular Identities Laboratory in the level one basement.

Martin had tools there that he used to extract DNA from even ancient tissue samples to achieve a variety of outcomes. And he could use DNA sequencing to determine if they had discovered a new species or compare DNA sequences from different organisms and measure the number of changes – mutations – between them to see if the species were closely or even distantly related. The guy was basically a DNA wizard.

She exited the lift and went directly to his laboratory and the bearish, bushy bearded man swivelled in his chair at her knock on the door. His face lit up.

“Well, well, the girl from the sky, Annie Walsh, come down here to meet with us Morlocks?” He stood.

“You're way too smart for a Morlock, Marty. And way too handsome.” She smiled, as she saw the cheeks above his straggly beard redden.

“Buttering up achieved.” He smiled back. “What can I do for you, pretty lady?”

She held up the sample in the tube. “This just came in. Can't work out what it is; can you do a rush job on it?”

He took it from her, opened it and sniffed, and then winced. “Oof, formalin.”

“Yeah, I know. Can you work with it?” she asked.

“Might be able to. Depends how long it’s been in there.” He turned to his desk and used a scalpel to tease the small piece of flesh out into a glass sample dish. He turned. “What exactly are you looking for?”

She shrugged. “What it came from. A match. Even species lineage will do.”

He exhaled through pressed lips. “Annie, come on, I’ve got work backed up for a week, and I’m in the middle of something.”

“Ple-eease.” She pouted.

He began to grin. “But for you....” He pulled a set of tools toward himself to prepare the sample for sequencing. He began to remove a wafer-thin slice. He paused and half turned. “Give me an hour.”

She crossed to him and kissed the top of his bushy haired head. “My champion.”

“That I am. Just say the word, girl.” He turned and waggled his eyebrows.

She laughed and waved over her shoulder as she left his lab. Out in the corridor, she used a tissue to wipe off the hairs that had stuck to her lipstick.

It was almost exactly one hour later that Martin called her, and then emailed her the results of the sequencing analysis.

Tuatara, he had written cryptically. It was the closest proximity match he could discern.

She looked at his data and then his summary analysis. Her brows knitted. Then her entire forehead creased as she slowly rose to her feet.

“Bullshit,” she whispered.

She opened the jar again and used the forceps to half lift the scrap of flesh out. She turned it over and then used a magnifying glass, noting how the hard bony skin was attached to the flesh.

It was real, and no clever fake. It was a conundrum and she continued to stare at the morsel of flesh.

Anne had investigated paleontological conundrums before. On a dig in Sweden’s Kristianstad Basin, they had located the fossilised bone fragments of a quadrupedal Sauropod creature they at first thought was one of the biggest land animals to ever exist.

The femur bone easily matched those of the Dreadnaughtus and Titanosaurus, but then then they found the tooth. Or fragment of it.

The tyrannosaurus rex had the largest teeth of any theropod dinosaur with many being twelve inches in length, conical shaped, and backward curving. These teeth were the same. But the shard of tooth they had found was at least twice that.

She remembered the wonder and excitement from the team she had been with. Every answer they came up with just posed more questions. The tooth and bone fragments made no sense, and the

bones were concluded to have been a mix of both theropod and quadruped dinosaurs that had been mixed, maybe washed down some prehistoric river during a catastrophic flood.

Though more study was done, the final classification of the creature or creatures had been reserved.

Anne felt the same thrilling sensations as she had back then, and she dropped the sample back in the tray and lifted Troy's note to quickly re-read his details. Anne's hand then went to her phone, and she snatched it up to dial his hotel.

"Hello, Scotsman Hotel. How can I help you?"

Anne stared into the distance for a moment, thinking, and then slowly put the phone down and disconnected. In seconds more she replaced the sample in the jar, sealed it, tucked it under one arm, and grabbed her coat.

She was on her way to his hotel in seconds more.

CHAPTER 10

Next morning Troy was slumped in one of his room's plush hotel chairs. He sported a hangover from the previous night, and the throbbing in his head did little to take his mind off the depression he felt about his business situation.

A company built over a decade was collapsing in front of his eyes and all within 12 months. When he got back home, he'd need to make some decisions about winding things up and laying people off.

He supposed he could get a well-paying job with one of his competitors, but after years of telling everyone in the market the other guy's products and services weren't as good as his, he'd have to do a lot of backpedaling, and he hated the thought of that.

And he still wasn't ready to be a glorified babysitter or cleaner for the ex-CIA machine.

But more than anything, Troy wasn't looking forward to being in his thirties and without money. He wouldn't panic just yet as he was confident he'd think of something. He always did. He still had a few options, although some of them seemed pure fantasy right now.

His stomach rumbled and he checked his watch and now understood why he was hungry – it was past midday, and breakfast had been a long time ago.

He sat back in the soft chair and thought of calling Elle, if not for lunch, then maybe for dinner. Something about the exotic Dutch woman intrigued him no end. And it wasn't just her looks, but her complementary interest in the Viking legend that he had been obsessed with since he was a boy – and talk about two souls finding each other after so many years apart. Finally, there was something that made him smile.

The doorbell rang, and his smile broadened as he got to his feet – maybe he didn't need to call her after all. He applied his coolest devil-may-care expression and pulled the door open.

"Oh..." His smile dropped but he quickly resurrected it. "Hi Anne... so you got my puzzle?"

She tilted her head. "We live, we laugh, we love... and then we vanish."

"Anne." He looked at her from under his brows. "That was a long time ago."

She scoffed. "Thirteen months is *not* a long time ago."

"I got called back to the office." He hiked his shoulders. "I'm sorry it all got a bit rushed at the end."

"Forget it." She waved it off. "I really didn't even notice you were gone."

"Now that hurts." He mock frowned. "Are you coming in, or would you like to punch me in the nose from there?"

"Yes, to coming in." She held up the jar. "Because of this. Not because of you."

He took her coat and hung it on the hook by the door. "You look good."

"I know." She smiled. "Gym, great lifestyle, less stress." Anne then placed the jar on the desk, turned it slightly, and folded her arms. "Okay, tell me, where did you get it?"

"I..." Troy paused. He couldn't exactly say he took it from a murdered Scot's curio shop, so he just massaged the truth a little.

"I go on holidays now and then up north. You ever herd of a place called Dunnet?"

"In Caithness?" she asked.

"Yeah, that's it. I stay on the coast and one of the things I like to do is go beachcombing. Weird stuff has been washing up from the sea for thousands of years."

"It washed up?" She pointed to it. "Like that, or was it on a bigger frame? What else was there?"

He shrugged and remembered old Blair's note attached to the jar. "Came from a partial rotting carcass left on the beach at low tide. Possibly some sort of whale but looked all bony and lumpy like an alligator or something. I couldn't really tell as it was a mess by then."

Her gaze was direct. "I need to see it."

Shit. I'm digging myself a hole here, he thought.

Troy shook his head and hiked his shoulders. "Gone; tide came in and next day when I went back there was nothing left. Must have washed back out."

"All of it?" Anne looked sceptical for a moment before throwing her hands up. "*Ach*." She then slowly paced in a small circle for a few seconds as she thought. She stopped in front of him. "You still need to show me where."

He nodded. "I can show you on a map, I guess."

She exhaled through clamped teeth, impatience and exasperation writ large in her expression. "Not good enough. I need to see the exact spot. There could be bones or other hard remains of the carcass in the sand."

He looked at her from the corner of his eye. "So, you want to race up to the top of Scotland, right now, all because of that flap of skin sample I sent you?" He leaned a little closer. "My sample, by the way." He folded his arms. "So, tell me what has excited you so much?"

Anne looked evasive for a few seconds, before obviously deciding. She sighed and tilted her head as she looked up at him.

"We ran a genetic analysis over a small piece of that skin, trying to

find out what it was. Or at least a close match to what it could be.”

“Okay, good. So, what is it?” he asked.

“That’s just it, we don’t know exactly. We only have some clues.” She turned to glance at the jar. “Which should be impossible given the extent of our genome databases.”

“*Hmm*, and?” He waited.

She faced him. “Have you ever heard of something called a tuatara?”

“Sounds like a Hawaiian island.” He smiled.

“I’ll take that as a no.” She laughed. “But few people have heard of it outside of reptile circles, or the South Pacific.” She stared into the distance for a moment. “A tuatara is a small reptile endemic to New Zealand. Looks a little like an iguana, with spikes and crests on its head and back.”

“Doesn’t sound that remarkable,” he said, hoping it was something a little more interesting.

He went to turn away, but Anne grabbed his sleeve.

“That’s not everything. The tuatara is the sole surviving member of an order, which originated in the Triassic period around 250 million years ago and which flourished during the Mesozoic era. This fragment of skin is from something like that. But not that.”

“But something like a New Zealand reptile. How big is it?” he asked.

“Under three feet, and full grown around 3-pounds,” she replied.

“I don’t get it, that piece of skin is a few pounds...” He thumbed over his shoulder to the jar, “... and it didn’t come from a 3-pound lizard.”

“You’re right, it didn’t. But you’re not paying attention.” She folded her arms. “I said it was *like* that. But *not* that. However, it’s the closest genetic match we could find.”

“So, what is it then?” he asked. “C’mon, make a guess; you’re the expert.”

“Well...” She stared back at the sample.

“Anne, I know you have an idea. Tell me, it won’t pass outside these walls.” He crossed his chest and held up a hand. “Promise.”

She began to nod slowly. “Okay, this is just a crazy idea. But there was something else that was around at that time of the tuatara order. And they also first appeared during the Triassic period and became the dominant terrestrial vertebrates after the Triassic–Jurassic extinction event some 200 million years ago.” She smiled. “Their dominance continued throughout the Jurassic and Cretaceous periods and only ended with an asteroid impact around 66 million years ago.”

“Get out of town; you’re going to say dinosaurs, aren’t you?” He grinned. “My flap of weird skin came from a dinosaur, is that what you’re telling me?”

She folded her arms. "Maybe it did. After all, tuataras are referred to as the last living dinosaurs."

"You got that from the DNA?" He was staring at her intently, waiting for her to burst out laughing, but instead her eyes were ablaze with enthusiasm.

"Not just the DNA." She went and turned the jar around and bent closer. "The skin fragment has unique scutes and potentially osteoderms; that's the real clue."

"That's what I thought – bony, like on a crocodile," he replied.

"Sort of, yeah." She nodded. "Like a crocodile, but again, not. Like a tuatara, but not. However, what I think..."

The knock on the door swung both their heads. Troy raised his eyebrows. "Did you invite anyone else?"

Her lips curled a little. "Knowing you, it's probably last night's date."

"That's not very nice." Troy opened the door, and his eyebrows went up. "Elle?"

"Bingo," Anne scoffed.

Troy gave Anne a stern look. "Elle is..."

"A friend," Elle said with a smile as she walked in.

She was six inches taller than Anne, and the paleontologist looked at her from under her lowered brows.

"Elleanor Kristiansen or Elle will do." She held out her hand.

Anne thought about it for a moment before taking her hand and shaking it disinterestedly. "Anne Walsh. *Doctor Anne Walsh*."

"Okay, good, now that we're all friends." Troy chuckled but could feel the tension in the room like it was a storm cloud hanging over all three of them about to crackle with lightning.

"Anne was just giving me an update on what she has found out about the sample I brought back from Dunnet. She said it was like a reptile from New Zealand that's referred to as a living dinosaur."

"See?" Elle shared a glance with Troy, and then turned back to Anne. "Well, that's good. I wondered what it could be when Troy described it. And what else did you find?"

Anne caught the glance and narrowed her eyes. "And I think something is missing here." She slowly faced Troy. "Troyson Strom, you're not telling me everything, are you?"

Troy knew one thing about Anne was that she could always give him that look that said her bullshit meter was ticking into the red.

He opened his arms. "What? You haven't asked me anything yet."

Anne pointed at the jar. "I'm not sure you're telling me the truth about where you got that, but right now that's not my priority. What is my priority, is I want in. If you go looking for the rest of it, I'm coming."

"I think we should be asking what it is that you're not telling *us*," Elle smiled sweetly. "Why don't you tell us everything you've found out about it, *hmm*? If you want Troy to be open and honest, I think you should do the same."

Anne gave Elle a withering look and then turned to pin Troy with her direct gaze. "If you do anything, plan anything, or go anywhere in relation to that *specimen*, I want to be there. Okay? Besides, I have the expertise you'll need."

Troy stared for a moment. He didn't have anything planned, so it could be an easy commitment to make. But then again, if he was planning anything, a knowledgeable palaeontologist would be useful.

He held up a hand and donned a saintly look. "You have my word."

Anne watched his face for a few more moments before nodding. "Good." She seemed to relax a little. "Because you're a bit of an asshole, but at least you're an honourable asshole."

Elle laughed. "Am I detecting a little history here?"

"History," Troy repeated.

"Lo-ooong gone history," Anne agreed.

"Okay, give. Tell us what else you found, or at least suspect?" Troy waited.

"Sit down, grab a coffee." Anne sat at the table with the jar of flesh suspended in it. She turned it a fraction and stared into its milky depths. "I have a story to tell you. A weird one. And a theory to go with it."

The pair sat on either side of Anne, and Troy noticed that Elle was as intensely interested as he was. He still hadn't had a chance to find out why she was here, but guessed he'd know soon.

Anne began: "As I mentioned, the rapid gene sequencing we performed gave back results that indicated the flesh came from something similar to the New Zealand's tuatara, a very rare and ancient line of reptiles that reached all the way back to the Triassic. That was interesting but not very illuminating as to the provenance of the tissue fragment."

She smiled. "But there were other clues to help me get a little closer to identifying the tissue's mystery owner. And they resided in the surface skin."

"The scutes and osteoderms you talked of," Troy added.

"Yes." She turned to him. "Did you know that the scutes on an alligator are unique? I'm not talking about them identifying it over a caiman or crocodile, but the larger post occipital scute patterns on an alligator can be as unique as fingerprints. So, you would think finding what species of creature it was would be easy. After all, it wasn't fossilised, right?"

Troy nodded. "Sure, makes sense."

“All right, stay with me here. Let me take you back to a warm afternoon in March just over ten years ago in Fort McMurray, Alberta, where a man by the name of Shawn Funk was using an excavator to burrow his way in through the earth. What he found was truly amazing.”

Elle sat forward.

Anne continued her tale. “As he burrowed beneath the ground, he cut through prehistoric age sands laced with bitumen; an easy substance to cut through. He passed by the remains of long dead marine plants and animals that existed over 110 million years ago. No big deal, he’d seen them before and the biggest thing he came across was chunks of fossilised wood and the occasional petrified tree stump. But then Funk’s bucket struck something much bigger and harder than the surrounding earth and rock.

“The hard substance was in weird shapes like nothing he’d ever seen and when Funk and his supervisor examined them and turned over one of the lumps it revealed a weird pattern that was row after row of sandy brown disks, each ringed in gunmetal grey stone with sharp ridges.”

“Scutes, fossilised scutes,” Elle whispered.

Anne nodded. “Exactly; fossilised scute patterning, osteoderms, in heavy armour plating, and of a massive size.”

Anne’s eyes glowed with excitement. “Shawn Funk hadn’t found a tree stump or parts of some fossilised creature, but he’d found something far more valuable and fantastic than that. What he uncovered was a near perfectly preserved creature known as a nodosaur, a giant, 110-million-year-old, armoured plant-eater, and the best-preserved fossil of its kind ever found.”

Elle smiled dreamily. “He found a dragon.”

“A dragon?” Anne turned to Troy.

Troy pretended to be mystified and simply shrugged.

“The patterning of that nodosaur is very similar to what was on your mystery skin flap. Much smaller of course, but it could have been a juvenile.” She leaned forward, her gaze gun-barrel straight into Troy’s eyes. “And the biggest difference is that Funk found something of stone, and you’ve given me something of flesh. Something that was still walking around tens of millions of years after they went extinct. So, Mister, your turn; where did it come from?”

Troy turned to look at the jar, his mind whirling.

Elle’s face slowly split into a broad smile. “I knew it. I knew it wasn’t a fossil.”

“Where? How? What do you know?” Anne demanded. She grabbed his arm and tugged it to bring his attention back. “Did you hear me, Troy? That thing was alive not 110 million years ago, but recently,

and it is *no* fossil.”

She eased back and looked at Troy from under her lowered brows. “I wonder what the scientific press would make of it.”

Troy blinked a few times, registering her threat. “No, we can’t have the press involved.” He pushed himself back. “We know a little but not enough; we just haven’t put everything together yet.”

Anne seethed. “Troyson Strom, for heavens’ sake, either give it up, or I’ll drop this onto the science community websites, and it’ll start a freaking stampede.”

Troy shook his head. “All I really know for sure is that this thing washed up on a beach in Dunnet like I said. And recently.”

“I know. I know you told me where it ended up. But what I want to know is where it washed up from?” Anne persisted. “Stop holding back on me.”

“That’s the question, isn’t it?” Elle smiled serenely. “We want to know where it came from as well. But right now, all we’ve got is a Viking legend and some partial clues.”

“I can help. I’m good at putting puzzles together,” Anne replied. “I’m a scientist, it’s what I do, especially in this field. Come on, let me in.”

Elle looked at Troy, and after a moment he gave her an almost imperceptible nod.

“I guess it’s our turn,” Troy said.

Elle turned back to Anne. “Have you ever heard of Lemuria?”

Anne seemed to think on it for a moment. “The name sounds familiar, but I can’t place it.”

“It’s from an ancient Viking legend, dating back to the very first Norsemen, and undoubtedly beyond,” Elle began. “It’s a legend of a lost world, a hidden island, called Lemuria. A place of mystery, treasure, and dragons, carved out by Odin himself.”

Anne laughed, and then obviously noticed both Elle and Troy had stony expressions. “You think it’s real?” Her face then became as serious as theirs. “And you know where it is?”

Troy shook his head. “No, we don’t. Not yet. But we think it is being revealed now due to the ice receding far up north.”

“Far up north? Beyond Scotland.” Anne stared. “And that’s where you think the sample might have drifted from?”

Troy nodded.

“Who else knows about this?” Her brows knitted. “And for that matter, how do you two know about it, and I don’t? and what are these partial clues you mentioned?”

“There’s an urn, or at least a shard of an urn, that tells the story of a sea voyage to a lost continent or island. Then, through research we were able to piece together the legend of Lemuria and how it is like a

testing ground for Viking warriors to prove themselves worthy of entry into Valhalla. That lost island is Lemuria, and we think it might be real,” Troy replied.

He sat forward and meshed his fingers together. “And to answer your first question, we believe someone else does know about it. And that’s where it gets a bit weird. And dangerous. Someone tracked down one of the clues and murdered the person they thought might lead them to it.”

“Murdered?” Anne blanched. “*Holy shite.*” Then she began to bob her head. “But it happens. I’ve heard of research scientists killing or beating up colleagues over stealing research. We’re a jealous bunch.”

“Yeah, I really don’t think it was some scientist guarding his latest research paper.” Troy half smiled. “And so far, the police still have no idea who committed the crime. But Elle managed to meet with the murder victim first and purchased the urn shard.” Troy sighed and slumped a little in his chair. “But whoever this asshole was, he...”

“Or she,” Anne said and cast a glance at Elle.

Troy rolled his eyes. “Yeah, anyway, the other piece of the urn was stolen from the museum in Denmark. It’s too much of a coincidence for me to believe it was done by someone else.”

“Jesus, Troy, this is getting serious.” Anne frowned.

“Damn right it is,” Troy scoffed. “And so here we are. With one half of the puzzle, and some mad killer with the other – so stalemate.”

“More like checkmate,” Anne scoffed.

“Not quite.” Elle lifted her chin. “In fact, I think we have both pieces of the puzzle. So, we’re the ones a step ahead.” She smiled. “Knight takes queen.”

“How do you figure?” Troy asked.

“I have one piece of the urn. And the killer has the other. The objective is not so much to just have both pieces of the urn, but to have both pieces so we can read the complete story of Lemuria,” she said.

“That’s right.” Troy waited.

“Well, we have one physical piece, and one digital piece.” Elle’s smiled broadened. “Because a handsome boy I once knew has the other piece, spread over a number of photographs.”

His forehead unfurrowed as his memory kicked in. “From my visit to the museum when I was a kid. I’m sure I still have those pictures.”

“We use your photographs to create a 3D printed segment. We have all the dimensions. We simply recreate the missing urn shard,” Elle stated. “It could work.”

“We don’t even need to do that.” He reached out and squeezed Elle’s hand.

Anne’s jaws clenched.

“Like you said, we don’t need the physical thing. And you’re right; it’s not really the urn we want, but what’s carved into, and drawn on it.” He raised his fingers, counting them off. “All we need to really do is photograph your piece, digitise it, and upload it. Then we merge the image sections – yours, and mine, that is pulled together from the old photographs.”

He turned. “I still have them. I know I do. I kept all my old photographs in a file.” Troy went to his computer and accessed his archives of his family photos. He chuckled. “From when I thought I wanted to be the next Jimmy Olsen.”

He dived down into different folders, passing by images of his parents, beaches, holidays in Italy, Bali, skiing in Colorado, and of his business’ social events. Then he came to his own Nordic collections, and there were hundreds.

He found a file folder titled ‘Viking Ship Museum’ and opening it he stopped at an image of a white-haired girl with huge front teeth, pointy nose, and eyepatch, sharing a broad smile with the camera. He turned it around to Elle.

“My first crush.”

Elle smiled. “When the sun seemed to shine every day. And handsome boys with cameras stole your heart.”

“Oh brother.” Anne looked up at the ceiling and groaned.

Troy chuckled and then found the pictures he was seeking. He pulled them up – there were around twenty photographs. The clarity was good, but not great.

“The rendition is a bit off, but back then the digital cameras weren’t high-resolution like today,” he said.

“Could have been worse. Just ten years earlier, and they’d be degrading polaroids stuck in your scrapbook.” Elle leaned closer. “We can work with these. But we need a 3D printer, probably a technician, and...”

“I can do it,” Anne stated. “Our lab has the software to provide a determination of shattered fragments and reconstruct them. I can certainly program it to recreate the urn’s surface, lay it out flat, match the size, and we can print it out. We even have a program that can tidy up your picture resolution.”

Troy and Elle looked at her.

Anne folded her arms and sat back. “Hey, this is me trying to help. And I figure it buys me in to whatever you guys are planning.”

Troy and Elle remained silent.

“Troy, you *know* I can be trusted,” she scoffed, as she held her hands up. “Mary mother of God, I can’t believe I even have to say that.”

“Okay, okay,” Troy said. He nodded slowly. “I can send you the images.”

Anne turned to Elle and raised her eyebrows.

Elle was unmoving.

"Elle, I can take..." Anne began.

"No, the urn stays with me. Someone just got killed because of it, and I will not let it out of my sight." She smiled tightly. "For security, and consider it also covering *your* ass."

Anne shrugged. "Fine. Come with me to the museum, and we can map it together."

"We all go," Troy said. "Double security."

"I don't know whether to be flattered or insulted." Anne cast a sceptical eye at them. "Okay, well I guess no time like right now."

CHAPTER 11

City of Aarhus, eastern shore of Kattegat Sea, Denmark.

Vissen Tygo sat in a huge leather armchair, fingers steepled, and stared at the spot-lit shard of urn he had stolen from the Museum.

The man's sleeves were rolled to the large and brawny forearm, and on each there were striking green tattoos – on his left arm was a snarling wolf with blazing eyes – Fenrir, the monstrous wolf of Norse mythology who was to bring about Ragnarök, the end of the world.

On his other forearm was Mjöllnir, the hammer of the thunder god, Thor, and the symbol of his power. It was inscribed with ancient runes and talismans.

Tygo claimed he was descended from the ferocious Ragnar Lodbrok, the 9th century Viking who led the largest clan in all of Iceland. And it was through his study of the man and the myths surrounding his ancestor that he had learned about the hidden island beyond Odin's Gate, and all its legendary wealth.

As far as Tygo was concerned it belonged to the Vikings, and as he saw himself as true Viking royalty, then that alone meant it all belonged to him. Anyone who got between him and his prize was to be crushed and swept aside.

Tygo had been working for years on his planning. He had a team assembled, some with him and some working within other teams, and the initiation trigger was pressed when the missing piece of the Lemuria urn surfaced.

But he missed it.

He turned to a wall and the set of large photographs he had taken of the paintings in the tomb. They were now hung in their order, showing the voyage to the wall of ice, then the entry through Odin's Gate, and then to the lost island of Lemuria.

He thought they, and the urn shard, would be enough. He was wrong. He drew in a deep breath, filling his barrel chest, meshed his fingers and sat studying the paintings. On his computer screen he had hundreds of likely places in Greenland, Norway, and Iceland identified. He had been trying to match up a landfall with what he had learned from the urn and the paintings.

Tygo felt he almost had it, his bearings, but not yet enough to find it.

"This world is too big a big place," he muttered, as he stared at the hidden island with the red heart at its center. He knew now he needed the missing piece of the puzzle; he must complete the urn.

He had only missed it by days. But it had surfaced after its

thousand-year sleep, and after learning who now had it, he was confident he would soon retrieve the missing piece.

“You were always a step ahead.” He smiled grimly.

Tygo sat forward, picked up the phone and sat staring into the fire. It connected quickly.

“Lars, round up Sven and Ord. Meet me here in one hour.” He hung up, stood, and went to the large oak table to lean forward on his knuckles and simply stare at the half shard of urn, its missing section mocking him for being too slow to retrieve it from Scotland.

He was still staring trance-like at the urn when the three men arrived. He let them in and stood before them. From his pocket he withdrew a photograph of Elleanor Kristiansen. He walked in front of each man, stopping to hold it momentarily in front of each of their faces.

“Sven, Lars, Ord, look closely at this person. She has something belonging to me. You will retrieve it.” He dropped the picture on the table.

Ord picked it up to study it further. He looked up. “What is this item, my warlord?”

Tygo pointed to the urn. “It will look like the missing piece to the urn, and it will be fragile. Be careful when you obtain it. This woman is staying at the Balmoral Hotel in Edinburgh, Scotland. When she is out, search her room. If she has the urn shard, follow her and take it from her. Make it look like a simple robbery. Do not kill her,” he warned.

The three men got to their feet and Tygo looked at each of the huge men. They were all over six two, but he was still half a head taller and hugely muscled.

“She has brought it with her for a reason. She is planning something, and time grows short.” He pointed at each of the men, one at a time. “Do not disappoint me.”

CHAPTER 12

It was already evening as Troy waited in Anne's car for Elle to retrieve her piece of the urn.

Anne had been sitting in silence ever since Elle had got out of the car, but he could almost hear her mind working.

Finally, she spoke. "So?"

"*Hmm?*" he waited.

"Why didn't you ever call back?" She turned. "Don't misunderstand me. I'm not looking for any sort of reconciliation. But one minute we were having a great time, and the next you just vanished."

"I thought you said you didn't even notice me gone?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Stop being an asshole." She faced forward. "It was a fair question."

He leant his head back against the seat headrest and turned. "I'm sorry, you're right, we had a great time together, but I had to return home urgently to try and salvage the business. I had no idea if I was ever coming back and I didn't know how to tell you. It hurt me to do it, but it just happened."

"It hurt, *huh?*" There was the hint of a smile. "Good."

He had guessed right – it was her ego that was bruised more than her heart.

"And the Dutch Barbie doll; when did she turn up?" Anne gave him a sweet smile.

"Elle's a nice girl, and one I met a long time ago," he replied. "And as you can tell, we share common interests."

"I know the type; she'll break your heart. That's what I can tell." Anne looked away.

Elle came to the door of her hotel holding a satchel. She quickly glanced up and down the street and then crossed to them to quickly slide into the back seat of the car.

"Let's go," she said.

Anne took them to the museum rear entrance and used her pass card to open the garage. She proceeded down the ramp.

"This time of night, there should be just Bernie doing the rounds; everyone else should be gone so the place is ours."

In seconds they were heading up in the elevator from the car park basement and stopped at the fourth floor where most of the research labs were. Anne led them to a large office that was dark but still smelled a little of electronics. She flicked on the lights, and they beheld a huge room filled with computer servers, screens, and all manner of devices, ranging from toaster size all the way to double refrigerator.

She led them to a work bench. "Step one, I need to get the 3D computer to photograph Elle's piece of the urn, and then feed in all of Troy's images." She turned to Elle and waited.

Elle opened her satchel and withdrew a bundle wrapped in soft cloth. Troy leaned forward, curiosity eating him alive.

She unwrapped the urn piece and lay the eighteen-inch-high half jug-like thing on the desk. "Be gentle," she said softly. "It's a thousand years old."

"Magnificent," Troy breathed. He reached out a hand but paused. "May I?"

"Of course." Elle leaned on her elbows and cupped her face to watch him.

Troy carefully lifted the hardened clay object. Much of the paint that was used had long faded away, but many of the runes and images had been carved and so were still visible.

"I can't imagine how magnificent it must have been a thousand years ago," he said almost reverently.

"I'm surprised it managed to survive, even though it was broken into pieces." Anne cast her expert eye over the shard. "They're usually found in burial mounds, or several of them will be interred with a chieftain when they bury an entire longboat with the body, weapons, food, and jugs of ale. Everything they expect to enjoy in Valhalla."

"That's how I want to go," Troy grinned.

"They also burned some of them in their favourite boat." Anne half turned. "I can help you out with that one."

"Wow, you two really did share some history," Elle scoffed.

"As you can see, I've forgiven him," Anne laughed softly and then turned back to her task. "Okay." She held out a hand and Troy gave her the shard. She took it to a tall device that looked like a microwave. "This is where we take the images of the objects we find. It has six built in cameras and takes hundreds of pictures from every angle. All are then used to build up a perfect image that we can use to create and cast a 3D likeness if we want. It takes about fifteen minutes."

She placed the urn on a stand, so the half portion stood upright. She then set a time, closed the door, and switched it on. Just like a microwave, the shard of urn turned slowly inside as the cameras did their job to build up the digital image.

"Now for your piece of the puzzle." She held out her hand to Troy and he handed her a mini drive where he had stored the pictures. Anne uploaded them, and then had an application clean them up so the resolution was improved, and any image gaps filled in.

"Then we just tell the computer to match the sizing of both components." She typed in some instructions to the console. "Clean up

the images, and then represent them in 2D.” She half turned. “I can even ask the software to make a best-guess on what the coloring pattern used to be like based on tiny fragments of dye it finds in the original cast.”

The cabinet finished taking pictures of the urn shard and started to create the flat image. When done, it then used Troy’s photographs to assemble another 2D image, and then brought the two sections together, creating a single flattened image.

“Oh no,” Troy sighed. “It’s not complete.”

Sure enough, there was a half fist-sized piece missing from the bottom. It was triangular and was broken from both pieces.

“Printing,” Anne said and pressed the button. In seconds the high-speed matrix printed a poster-sized print from the merged image. It peeled out, and was magnificent, colorised, and clear. But with the missing segment, only around 90% complete.

Anne brought the large poster to the table and laid it out. “This is early Norse, and I’m not an expert.”

“I can read some,” Elle replied.

“So can I,” Troy said and nodded to Elle. “But I’m betting your skills are better than mine. So, over to you.”

Elle traced the beginning of the runes that looked like nothing more than ordered strokes and whorls and were now filled in with various colors of black, red shades, and ochre.

Elle’s brows came together as she began. “*Through the endless mist to the forbidden waters... A bit missing.*” She moved her section to where the runic writing picked up again, “... *of Grœn...* The text is gone again. And picks up over the missing piece again. *Enter the valley of ice. There Odin’s Gate awaits.*”

Troy frowned. “What’s this word?”

“*Drekafinnari* – dragon finder.” Elle straightened. “Its phrasing makes me think it’s an object.”

Troy nodded and read more of the words. “*Look to the dragon’s eye.*” He sighed. “There’s more text missing. If it’s an object, its location is lost.”

“Is the *dragon’s eye* a place?” Anne asked. “Like a landmark?”

“Good question,” Troy replied.

Troy traced the missing section. “Dammit, and right where it probably tells us where, is gone.”

“It actually told us a lot,” Anne said. “Valley of ice, even when there were great periods of warming, would have meant it was somewhere far north that remained ice-bound. And the reference to ‘Grœn’, that’s the Norse name for Green. If I was a betting woman, I’d bet that was a reference to Greenland.” She half turned. “But was it called that then?”

“Yes, in fact, during the 980’s a band of Vikings led by Erik the Red set out from Iceland and reached the southwest coast of Greenland,” Elle replied. “Apparently, they found the region uninhabited, and settled there. Erik named the island Greenland, or *Grœnlund* in Old Norse.”

Anne nodded. “Makes sense; back then, a lot of Greenland was covered in miles of grassland, unlike today, where it is still covered in snow and ice, even though much of it is receding.”

“Good information.” Troy liked what he was hearing.

“Where did the piece come from?” Anne asked Elle.

“According to the man who sold it to me, it washed up on the beaches of Dunnet. It was still in a thawing block of ice.”

“Dunnet.” She turned to Troy with a half-smile. “Just like your flesh fragment. Seems all manner of things are washing up there,” she exhaled. “But it was lucky, because if it had thawed out it would have been lost.” She lifted a finger in the air. “And there’s something else that’s lucky – we’ve had access to information mapping the currents in those seas for decades, and even have model drift patterns.”

“Of course, NASA.” Troy snapped his fingers. “They have satellite ocean data we can use. We might be able to use it to see where the ice came from. After all, it can’t have been in the water for long, years or even months I mean, as the ice would have melted even though it’s bone chillingly cold up there.”

“Yep.” Anne went and signed onto a terminal and brought up the browser. She logged into the NASA public data feeds and called up a visualisation showing ocean current flows on a flat map of the world. It was colourised and clicking on a button showed it in animated form with the swirls and circling of the major and minor ocean flows, currents and eddies.

“This is a simple flat map called a cylindrical equidistant projection – we use them a lot to analyse where some seaborne fossils may have washed from.” She pointed. “The flows are coloured by sea surface temperatures with greens and blues being cooler waters and yellows and reds warmer waters – for each second that passes in the visualisation, about 2.5 days goes by.”

Anne switched to the next screen. “Interesting. The currents around Greenland – on the western coast – travel north...”

“That’s no good to us,” Troy interjected.

Anne pointed to the map. “But look, on the eastern coast it passes south down along the east coast of Greenland, then enters the Norwegian Sea close to the Norway coast. So, if I was a block of ice that broke off from Greenland’s coast, I’d travel south, down past Iceland, then depending on the wind and weather conditions, I could have been picked up by the North Sea current, or... come down along

the coast of Scotland.”

Elle scoffed. “So, for the potential point of origin, we’ve narrowed it down to about 2,500 miles of Greenland’s rugged frozen coastline. That’s a lot of area to investigate.”

Anne sighed as she nodded. “Yeah, too much.” She moved through the different satellite maps. “Mostly shrouded in cloud and mist.” She pulled one up that showed the weather patterns over the east coast of Greenland for the past year.

She was about to move on when she paused, and her brows came together. “That’s weird.” She went to the filter matrix and widened the time period, going back two years, then she did it again to five, then ten, speeding it up now.

She clapped once. “Got it.” She straightened, her face beaming.

Troy grinned. “Okay, you look like you just found the last golden Wonka ticket. Give it up.”

“The shard told us that they passed *through the endless mist to the forbidden waters.*” Anne rested her hands on her hips. “Question; what causes mist?”

“Warm water meeting cold air.” Elle shrugged. “At least for one of the main seaborne features of mist.”

“Exactly. And that’s the one I was looking for...” Anne turned back to the screen and pointed, “...and found.”

Elle and Troy crowded closer.

Anne went on. “The east coast of Greenland is largely uninhabited. Waters up there are good for fishing...”

“I know, my brothers have a fishing boat up in those seas,” Elle added.

“Well, there is no significant human habitation. No industry, and no forest fires or anything else to create natural or unnatural warmth. So then, what’s causing this...?”

Anne stepped back from the screen allowing Elle and Troy to examine the images. The timeframe was for the last decade but sped up to show the moving weather patterns over the east coast of Greenland and the Greenland Sea.

There was rapidly moving cloud cover, swirling, streaking, some blanketing the coast and sea for weeks. There were also some blobs of mist forming and then dissipating – except in one area – there was a patch of mist, three quarters of the way up the coast and about equal with Svalbard, the remote Norwegian island.

The land up there was frozen, rugged, and always covered in ice. But the mist cloud hung over an area of just a few square miles. And never moved.

Troy grinned. “Something is warming the air and water there.”

“Thermal upwelling, maybe some sort of runoff, or something that

is now being revealed by the retreating ice,” Elle added.

“Revealed or opened again after a thousand years.” Troy turned to her.

“Odin’s Gate,” Elle breathed. “Now it makes sense; that film my brother shot. That creature didn’t look like any whale or fish species we know, especially cold-water varieties, as it looked more at home in warmer waters.”

“And warmer waters from some other time,” Troy agreed. “And I bet once it got out, it was trying to get somewhere warmer.”

“What? What film? What creature?” Anne stepped in between them. “Who’s got what now?”

“Show her,” Troy requested. “She’s the expert.”

Elle seemed to think about it for a moment before retrieving her phone, calling up the video, and handing it to Anne. “Taken in the Greenland Sea about 3-weeks ago.”

Anne cursed under her breath and grabbed the phone. “You treat me like a Scottish mushroom.” Her brows were deeply knitted as the film began.

Troy watched over her shoulder as the full fishing net was being hauled over the side, disgorging the massive thing that unfurled itself onto the freezing deck.

“I don’t....” Anne’s eyes widened as she stared. “*Whoa.*”

The creature shimmered in the misty light with an iridescent blue-grey scaling on its back, but a pale belly – and it reared up and hissed, its long triangular head splitting open like a triangular bear trap revealing an outer row of sharp, conical teeth.

“Holy shit.” Anne blinked and shook her head as she watched as the creature attacked, men screamed and cursed, and one fell to the deck severely wounded. The camera wobbled, and the creature unfurled a scythe-like tail.

“The tail, the tail is the giveaway,” she said softly.

There was blood, more panicked shouting, and then in the blink of an eye it was over the side and gone. The film ended.

She replayed it again. And then again.

“What do you think?” Troy asked. “Could it be real?”

Anne had halted the film on the creature and enlarged the image, and she just stared.

“That’s no fish.” Her lips moved almost in a mumble. And then: “Large-bodied marine lizard...” She brought the screen closer to her face, “... sturdy, conical teeth and an elongated pre-maxilla and extensions of the dentaries. Lightly built, relatively small pectoral and pelvic girdles, fore-and-hind limbs. Color, shape, and patterning suggestive of an ambush predator.”

“Welcome back, beautiful.” Her lips moved for a moment more, not

quite forming words, before she went on. "Possibly a Liodon, no, no, for that region, more like a Tylosaurinae; they were prevalent in the top north." Her eyes narrowed. "Around thirty feet and maybe four thousand pounds, give or take, so size is right."

"Well, *could* it be real?" Troy asked again.

Anne handed the phone back to Elle. "Anything can be faked. And my professional on-the-record position is, it probably is a fake." She shared a broken smile with them. "And frankly, I hope it is a fake. Because that looked like a species of mosasaur, and those things were the ocean's alpha predators and dominated the global waterways for around 50-million years. We would not want them in our waters today."

"Cancel swimming this summer," Troy laughed softly.

"Cancel swimming, fishing, yachting, everything season. I mean it. They were air breathers and hunted in the sea. But they could even pull things from the shoreline. Imagine something like an alligator that could swim as fast as a dolphin, and with a few species growing up to 60-feet." Anne looked up. "And you're right; if these things suddenly found themselves in those cold waters, the first thing they'd do is try and get somewhere warmer."

"It's real," Elle pressed. "Lemuria, the mysterious island in the hidden sea, is real." Her eyes radiated excitement. "To the Vikings, they lived in a time of dragons, and sea serpents, and monsters. Things we think of as myth and magic was their everyday life." She grabbed his hand. "That time has come again. Whatever barrier that was hiding it has come down."

Troy suddenly felt off balance and things were rushing at him. He rubbed his face and then sat back and smiled at her. "Look, as kids we wanted it to be real, but we're not kids anymore. I'll believe there might be a place where Vikings hid treasure, that might be surfacing from under the ice again. But not that there is a place that has monstrous things still living on it. We need to tone down our expectations and be prepared to find that the myth is what it is, a myth, a fiction. We must approach this with a level head. With science. Or we'll end up down a rabbit hole."

Anne sighed loudly.

Troy turned to her. "Anne, you're a scientist. Back me up here."

Anne's eyes were unfocussed, and she spoke without turning. "Wrangel Island."

"What?" Troy shook his head. "What does that mean?"

"There's an island in the Arctic Ocean called Wrangel Island." Anne folded her arms, her eyes half lidded. "It's remote, mostly ice-locked these days, and not much there. But it's special because it was once a

time capsule.” She smiled. “You see, the last woolly mammoths lived there for thousands of years after they went extinct everywhere else on the planet.”

“I heard about that; pygmy versions, weren’t they?” Elle asked.

“No, you’re thinking of something different – there were some species that also became cut off and shrunk over the millennia, like those in the Channel Islands. But not these guys; the Wrangel Island herd were full sized; most 13-feet tall at the shoulder. And they were still stomping around when human beings were building the pyramids. We just missed them.”

“You said it’s basically frozen over now, so I’m guessing the climate got them in the end,” Troy said.

Anne nodded. “That, and there is evidence that bands of hunters finally found the island – maybe people could walk across the ice by then to get to them. Anyway, it sealed the ancient giant’s fate.”

Elle turned to Troy. “See?”

“It’s not really the same,” Troy replied.

Anne’s mouth curved into a wry smile. “No, it isn’t. But what I’m saying is that some species can survive if they can find somewhere remote and they are left alone. So, yeah, there’s a precedent.”

“There’s an old saying.” Elle smiled and leaned forward. “Eventually all things hidden are revealed. Time does that for us, whether we want it to or not.”

“Now you’re quoting fiction authors to me?” Troy got to his feet and paced. He rubbed a hand on his stubbled jaw. “But where? Even a never moving fog bank can’t hide an entire island. Nothing can stay hidden from all the satellite imaging technology we now have.”

“We don’t know where it is exactly. Yet,” Elle said. “But the Vikings did.”

“But how?” Troy turned to her. “Vikings navigated mainly by line of sight. They didn’t use a compass, they looked at the colour of the sea, the way the waves were moving and the way the wind was blowing. They looked out for birds and could smell if they were near land. None of that works in thick fog.”

“I don’t know how they did it. But they did,” Elle asserted.

The trio sat in silence for several minutes, each lost in their own thoughts.

“So, what now?” Anne asked.

“Now, we need to follow the last voyage of the *Skidbladnir*. Where they went, we need to follow.” Elle’s gaze was directed at Troy. “And find our mysterious island.”

“It might all be nothing. But I’m in.” Anne’s eyebrows were high on her forehead. “But...” she held up a finger and then pointed at the NASA weather charts over Greenland. “It’s still a large portion of the

coastline shrouded in mist – perhaps fifty, sixty, or more miles. And travelling by air is out with zero visibility.” She shrugged. “Still need to fine tune our search or it could take us years.”

“Doesn’t matter how we go; if we can’t find our way through the fog, we’ll find nothing.” Troy rubbed his temples.

“You’re right, so we need the thing that Ulf Skarsgard used, the dragon finder, whatever that is, and wherever that is.” Elle sat forward; the confident smile never left her lips. “And where do you find dragons?”

“According to the legend, beyond Odin’s Gate,” Troy replied. “Or at least what Ulf Skarsgard thought were dragons.”

“Given what that flap of skin told us, and by watching Elle’s video, I’m betting it’s more like some sort of large saurian,” Anne added.

“Forget that.” Elle frowned. “We have to think like a Viking for a moment. The object was referred to as a *drekafinnari*, a dragon finder. It means he had it before he found Odin’s Gate. He used it to *find* Odin’s Gate.”

“Good, that means it might not be inside the gate.” Troy nodded.

“So where else do you find dragons?” She looked up. “Come on, think like a Viking.”

“For Vikings, dragons and sea serpents were everywhere,” Troy replied. “In their art, jewellery, their writing, on the urn, and... their boats.”

“Their boats were called dragon ships.” Elle grinned. “And what was at the prow of Ulf’s dragon ship?”

Troy began to laugh. “A green-eyed dragon.”

“Remember the inscription: ‘Look to the dragon’s eye’,” Elle said softly. “Or maybe we should look *behind* it.”

Troy clapped his hand. “That’s got to be it. That’s where it is.”

“We have to get to Norway. *Now!*” Elle announced.

EPISODE 04

“The gates of hell are open night and day” – Virgil, Aeneid

CHAPTER 13

Year of 1020 – Lemuria, the Mysterious Island – to Odin's Heart

The all-seeing eye pointed the way, and Ulf watched it swivel in the palm of his hand. Satisfied, he then placed it back in the pouch on his belt.

They had finally climbed out of the accursed swamps. They had lost three strong men, and he ground his teeth remembering how they were snatched from their group, not by beast, but by some sort of accursed living plant. And their screams still haunted him.

For the last few hours they had been following a watercourse, but now had to trek away from it. The land sloped upwards, and though he could not see the sky which seemed in a perpetual white haze like the heavens were made of ice or snow, he wondered whether they were ascending to Valhalla and would soon find themselves above the clouds.

It was Arne, who had the sharp vision of an eagle's eyes, that first spotted the building when they crested the hill.

A massive tree like a jungle banyan had totally enfolded the structure in its muscular embrace of titanic roots and limbs. But sure enough, inside that monstrous tangle there was a castle or fortress of immense proportions, and Ulf felt his spirits lift when he saw the red glow coming from inside.

"That does not look to be the glow of a fire, but of something else," Arne whispered.

"It can only be the heart of Odin," Ulf replied.

"Then our quest is nearly at an end," Njal remarked as he shifted his axe to his other massive, tattooed shoulder.

Ulf nodded, but then held his warriors back for a moment more. The building was not something he had ever seen on any land. It was unlike even the biggest and grandest Viking structures, who normally used a lot of wood. Instead, this was stone, and had columns thicker than a draft horse around. There were arc-shaped windows, and a wide double door at front, that was also made of stone.

"It is a house of giants," Sten, the stone faced one, said.

"I would expect nothing less from a house of Odin." Ulf nodded. "Would you?"

Before the building there was open ground that looked to be covered in a bracken-like plant that hugged the ground. Every few dozen paces there were broad leaves like the pads of giant water lilies, but the size around of an ox-cartwheel.

Ulf let his eyes move over the surrounding jungle and could see no

movement. Even though his senses prickled, warning him of danger, he could see, hear, or smell nothing.

He stayed like that for many minutes, watching, but still nothing moved. He finally turned.

“Spread to three lines, move out.”

The warriors did as ordered and as they moved forward, they placed their feet carefully. Most had on pants of scraped leather, hide boots with strapping to the knees, and most had armour chest coverings made from cured reindeer hide. Ulf, as a chieftain, wore crafted lamellar which was many tiny metal plates painstakingly sewn together.

All the warriors had cloaks made from animal fur, but their brawny arms hung free with only leather gauntlets for protection – when swinging weapons, it was best to be unencumbered for maximum speed.

Brynhilde came up beside him and bumped up against him. “I don’t like this,” she whispered.

“You don’t like anything,” he chuckled.

“This is not true. I like you.” She grinned, showing a missing side tooth. “But everything else is shit.”

Ulf laughed. Yes, he would definitely take her as his wife when they returned. Odin willing.

The chieftain looked down at the huge leaf pads that glistened as if covered in oil or slime. He and the other warriors walked around them, as they looked slippery, and no one wanted to fall as the ground-covering bracken had sharp thorns as long as a finger.

It took them half of one hour to reach the monstrous tree that enfolded the fortress. Ulf looked at the titanic roots and trunk; it was the biggest growth he had ever seen.

“Is it Yggdrasil?” Brynhilde asked.

Ulf lifted his face higher, seeing up into its massive spreading limbs. Yggdrasil was the mighty tree of life and held together the nine worlds of the Vikings.

“It is big enough. And I cannot see its crown in the mist,” he replied, and then turned. “Njal.” He nodded to the man, then at the building, and his warrior bravely walked forward.

Njal climbed the steps, each one at least half his height so it was no easy task. At the top he stood outside the wide doors and peered in as the red light bathed him, making him glow. After another moment he turned to Ulf to wave his axe.

Ulf and the warriors quickly joined him. Just as they saw from the outside, as it was inside – everything was oversized as if it was built for beings twice their height. There were statues, artefacts, ancient all of them, but the only thing that drew their eyes was what sat on an

altar at the end of the room.

It was a red stone as large as a man's head. And it glowed like caged fire. It was not a constant illumination, but instead pulsing. Just like a heart.

Ulf went to one knee, and the others followed his lead.

"The heart of the All Father." He bowed his head and held both hands forward, palms up. "Please mark us as worthy, oh great Odin."

Ulf eventually got to his feet, and for the first time looked around the huge room. Above them the ceiling was broken open in places as the colossal tree had lifted away the blocks of stone that were once its roofing.

Around the room, there was treasure – chests, bowls, urns, all overflowing with gold, silver, and precious stones. Much of it was scattered on the floor, as well as weapons of gleaming silver.

"Leave the tributes," Ulf said.

Several of the men came forward to empty their sacks of gold and precious gems upon the piles. Many of their brothers and sisters had died to collect this much wealth, but all knew that their reward was to be transported across the rainbow bridge to Odin's great hall when they died. It was worth it a thousand times over.

And Ulf only wanted one thing. He walked forward towards the heart – he just wanted to touch it – just once.

But every step he took, every foot he got closer, his head hurt and even his back teeth ached. As he stared at the pulsating blood red stone his eyes watered and his vision blurred a little as if there were veils of mist being drawn before his eyes.

He strained forward and reached out a hand. Even from a foot away he felt the warmth being radiated from the huge gemstone.

"It is hot," he breathed and then looked over his shoulder to his woman.

"Careful, my lord," Brynhilde warned. She nodded to Sten and one other warrior from her boat and the two took up positions to the left and right of their chieftain for support.

Ulf turned back, feeling the warmth of the gem's glow on his cheeks and he let his hand hover over it. He stared into its core, and thought he saw movement, like it was a deep water with things coiling languidly in its depths.

While he stared, oddly, a few pebbles rained down from above to bounce on the floor, and even from his shoulders. He slowly tore his gaze away from the red heart and looked to the tiny bits of gravel bouncing around them, and then slowly lifted his face to the roof – his eyes went wide, as staring in through a large hole was a monstrous head, nearly the size of his longboat, and its eyes were slit like a viper's and the color of the ruby stone.

It was so still it could have been part of the ceiling, and Ulf backed up a step – he remembered the legend now: finding the island was not Odin’s test. Finding the heart was not the test. But facing the dragon was.

More stones rained down as the creature inched toward them. Sten, who stood to his right, finally looked up, and lifted his huge axe.

“*The drekka*,” the warrior yelled.

Even before he finished the word, the massive creature roared and the sound was so loud and forceful, Ulf felt it deep into his bones.

He ordered a retreat, but as soon as the warriors began to move, the massive mouth opened, and no roar came this time, but instead, it ejected a stream of its saliva. It covered Sten from head to foot.

Immediately the big man screamed, and steam rose from him. Right in front of Ulf’s now wide eyes, the large warrior melted. Sten’s furs and armour went first, then his skin, and as he crumbled to the ground, it was just the sticks of bones and his still steaming skull that remained.

“Retreat!” Ulf yelled. “Back to the boats.”

The group fled, bounding down the giant steps, and then charging across the field of bracken. But in their haste, many of them stood on the large lily pads. And as soon as they did, they found the plants were not slippery as expected, but instead sticky like wood tar, and they glued their feet tight.

Some of the warriors decided to hack at the broad sticky leaves. Some began to pull off their boots, but this meant running across the thorned briars in bare feet.

Either way, it slowed them down, and from behind, the leviathan snaked around the massive tree and building. Ulf turned as he ran, and in Lemuria’s shadowy twilight he felt a shock of fear run through him at the size and horror of the thing.

Odin’s pet, he whispered.

It stood on four legs, with scales bigger than a door. And those scales were covered in moss and other strange growths as if the dragon was an ancient being from a former time. Wicked spikes and spines rose from its back and head, and each claw was nearly the size of a full-grown man.

The ground shook with each titanic step it took, and in just a few strides it caught the first of the stuck warriors. Most went into its mouth and bones crunched and the flesh made a liquid squashing sound as it was consumed. Other warriors, now without their boots, ran as fast as they could across a field of thorns that shredded their feet, but as the alternative was a violent grisly death, no man slowed a fraction.

As Ulf approached the forest line, he prayed it was too thick to

accommodate the beast. Already there, waiting for him and urging him on, was Brynhilde and just seeing her calmed his nerves and made him want to be strong for her.

She grabbed his arm. "We can make it."

"We *will* make it." Ulf grabbed her hand and pushed her in front of him and then roared to his men to run for their lives.

And run they did, madly, all the way back to their boats as a beast from Hell exploded into the forest behind them, pushing aside mighty boughs as if they were kindling.

CHAPTER 14

Viking Museum, Bygdøy peninsula, Oslo, Norway – today

Anne walked in through the front doors of the museum, holding up her phone and filming as she went. She talked softly to provide narrative.

“One guard out front, big, formidable, mid-thirties.” She went through the air-conditioned rooms and spotted another person. “Second guard inside, older, mid 50s, and out of shape.”

She then passed by the ship room and entered the hall where the completed reconstruction work of the *Skidbladnr* had been undertaken.

The ship was firstly roped off, and secondly now had a shield of clear Plexiglass in front of it – it was thick and looking down she saw it was bolted to the floor. However, it was only designed so that the boat could not be removed, and there was a space between it and the wall – it should be enough.

“I don’t think you could drive a truck through that armoured glass,” she whispered. “But we can get in behind it.”

Anne then walked in as close as she could get. The older guard walked past, nodded, and smiled to her.

“*God morgen*,” she said and smiled in return.

He exited and then she had the room to herself again. Anne focussed in on the remaining jade eye, moving from one side to the other.

She saw that the human-sized eye had runic carving in its center acting like a pupil. The green eye was still luminous and beautiful after all the centuries, and she bet when the eye had been polished, it would have shone like green fire.

Anne glanced over her shoulder and crossed to one of the windows – it was fortified by steel bars, and the wire of an alarm just showed at the top where it was attached to the glass with a tiny sensor. She filmed them.

In the corners of the room, there was also a few sensor lights and a single camera. She sighed. It wasn’t going to be easy.

“I’ve seen enough; coming out,” she said.

Troy uploaded Anne’s film to his computer and then they played it again for their group.

“Alarms, sensors, guards, cameras, and metal bars – not going to be easy,” Elle said.

“Looking at it altogether, you’re right. So, let’s break it down,” Troy replied. In his previous life in the CIA, he had needed to enter secured

buildings and rooms many times. In those times, the places had been a lot more fortified than this out-of-town museum. But then he had an entire tech team and a huge budget at his disposal.

But on a scale of this museum to Fort Knox, it should have been easy. "Sensors, alarms, and cameras all run on power, so we cut them off." He straightened. "And do you know what gets people running – one way or the other? Yelling fire."

"We start a fire?" Anne's eyebrows shot up.

"I like it." Elle smiled back. "But just a small one."

Anne scowled. "Hey, as a museum person, I've got to show solidarity here and tell you I object to this."

"It's not ideal, but if you have another suggestion, lay it on us," Troy replied.

"Ah, um, what about we bribe them?" Anne nodded. "Yeah, offer them a thousand euros each. Troy has money."

"Had money," Troy scoffed. "Besides, too many risks. They may say no, or it may take too long, and we'll have shown our hand. They could report us, and then triple the security. It'd be game over before we even start. We need to get in, do what we came to do, and be on our way home before they even know what happened."

"Then at least start the fire outside and not close to any displays. Otherwise, the heat might ruin the artefacts." Anne folded her arms.

Troy thought it over. "Okay, I agree. We'll make sure there is more smoke than fire. Just enough to create a panic and keep the guards occupied for a while." Troy nodded. "We can do this."

"That leaves one thing – there's metal bars on the windows and the door is solid." Anne tilted her head. "Or do we smash that down as well?"

Troy shook his head. "When I was a kid, one of my neighbours had his house broken into. It was weird because he had these huge doors, locks, and window grills. But then we found out that the burglars didn't come via the door, or window, but simply pulled tiles off his roof, cut a hole in the plaster ceiling, and dropped in. No one saw or heard a thing."

Elle nodded. "Brilliant."

"I'm nervous already. We're actually going to do this." Anne blew air between her lips. "When?"

Elle and Troy glanced at each other.

Troy shrugged. "Got to be tomorrow night."

"Then we take the red eye out after midnight," Elle said. "Be back in Scotland by morning."

Troy straightened. "Let's make it happen."

Anne closed her eyes. "Oh, Mother Mary, I feel sick."

At 10 p.m., Troy helped load their bags in the trunk of the rental. They wouldn't be returning to the hotel, and if everything went to plan, they'd be on a plane, departing the country just after midnight.

He jumped in and turned in his seat. "Everyone ready?"

Elle's single green eye shone with excitement, but Anne was as pale as a sheet. They both nodded.

All three were dressed in dark outfits and had a change of clothing for the plane. They also had a bag of tools they'd need with clippers, bolt cutter, spray paint, plastic tape, a bottle of gasoline, and anything else they could think of, or Troy had used in the past. They also had a ladder they stole from a nearby farm and Troy had secreted close to the museum earlier in the evening.

"What's our cover story?" Anne asked as they pulled in about a quarter mile from the museum.

"We're American tourists." Troy turned. "And this is what we usually do in the evening back home, right?" He winked.

Anne slumped. "Oh, good gGod. I don't want to spend the next few summers in a Norwegian jail. Plus, it'll look really crap on my resume."

"You wanted to come, remember?" Elle grinned.

"To find your mysterious island, not steal from a fellow museum," Anne shot back.

"Don't sweat it; we'll tell them you didn't know what we were planning." Troy turned back around.

"I didn't know either," Elle laughed. "I'll come visit you in jail, Mr. Strom."

Troy groaned. "Thanks for the support, guys. *Sheesh*, Team Mission Impossible we are *not*."

They exited and made their way to the line of trees across the road and waited and watched. The night was cool and settled, and thankfully, empty. There was a single car parked out front probably belonging to one of the guards.

After about twenty minutes a guard came out and lit a cigarette. Troy handed Elle the gasoline.

"See that car? Once that guard goes back inside, I want you to douse it in gas and set it alight." He pointed to a junction box on the side of the building. "Once it's alight, I'm going to pull all the fuses. If I go up in smoke, leave without me." He checked his watch. "Worst case scenario we'll only have ten minutes of confusion. Best case, maybe fifteen."

"What do you want me to do?" Anne asked.

"Take the ladder and prop it up against the east side of the building, close to the *Skidbladnr* room," he replied.

The guard threw his cigarette to the ground and placed a foot on it.

It continued to glow as he went back in the front door. The glow of his flashlight receded.

“Perfect; it was his cigarette that caused the blaze,” Elle sniggered.

“Everyone ready?” Troy asked.

They nodded, so he drew in a deep breath. “Good luck everyone.” Troy pushed the car door open. “And...go.”

Elle, Anne, and Troy headed fast to their designated task sites. Elle was first, splashing the car with the gas. She lit a match and tossed it. The car went up with an eye-blinding *whump*. She then raced around the corner to join Anne.

Troy waited at the fuse box for a few seconds until he saw the first guard come out fast. The man’s eyes widened and he cursed and began to yell. Then the second, older guard appeared.

Troy pulled the fuses. The lights went out. He hoped there was no secondary power source inside. They’d soon know. He raced to join Elle and Anne.

As soon as Troy rounded the corner of the back of the building, he saw the ladder already upright and extended, with Anne at its base and Elle already at the top and stepping onto the roof.

“*Hurry, hurry,*” Anne said, looking panicked.

He immediately began to climb. “Be back in a few minutes. Hang tight,” he said.

“You must be joking.” Anne began to follow him up.

By the time he made it to Elle, she was already down on her hands and knees and using a small crowbar to lift some of the roof tiles. The sound of the fire and the men yelling instructions to each other was the excellent cover they hoped for.

He joined her and together they soon had half a dozen tiles removed and a hole big enough to slip through. Elle stuck her head in and waved a flashlight around.

“No extra alarms,” she said and without another word dropped in, followed by Troy and then Anne.

They moved quickly, trying to walk on the beams and found the corner where they estimated the boat room was. They then set to using knives to cut a section of the plasterboard in the ceiling and peeled it back.

Inside the museum it was as dark as expected. Each quietly dropped down, landing lightly. In seconds more they were behind the glass shield and looking up at the *Skidbladnir*.

Being so close to it, Troy inhaled the smell of the ancient wood – it conjured images of old mist laden forests, sea breezes over frozen seas, and for some reason, heady jugs of ale.

Elle shone her light up at the prow head. The single green eye still shone in their lights. *The dreka*, she whispered and lay a hand on its

cheek as if petting the face of a horse. "Hello, old friend."

Troy thought that odd but set to his task. "Sorry, wood blade, but Ulf left something here to be found." He reached up and dug his knife in beside the remaining green eye. After a second or two it popped free into his hand.

He stared into the hole, and frowned. "Shit," he spat. "There's nothing behind it."

He looked to the other eye, but up-close saw this one was fake, plastic, and obviously a prop they had recently inserted for the restoration process. He dug it out anyway, and behind it, again nothing.

"The fire is out," Anne hissed.

Then the lights came back on.

Troy spun and saw the alarm sensors blinking – it meant they were resetting – the group had minutes or maybe only seconds more.

He popped the fake eye back in and dug his knife deeper into the empty socket of the real eye, but there was nothing but ancient wood.

"*Dammit*," he seethed.

"We must go." Elle dragged on his shoulder.

"Okay." Troy tried to jam the green stone back in, but it wouldn't stick as his knife had widened the hole.

Elle held his arm now and began to tug furiously. "They're coming."

"*Um, ah...* dammit, okay." He pocketed the stone and then together they crossed to the hole. Elle and Anne together hoisted him up and Troy turned to reach down and pull the women up one after the other.

As Anne's legs waved in the air, the motion sensors reset, and the alarms began to scream.

Anne swung from shock and slid down his arm. Troy sucked in a deep breath and yanked the dangling woman up. He then quickly replaced the removed section of ceiling, knowing it would be found in seconds. As he did, he heard the sound of running feet – time to bug out.

The three went back out through the hole in the roof tiles, fast-walked the roof, and when landing on the ground, took the ladder with them.

In moments more, they were back in the car and speeding away. A mile down the road, Troy's arm was aching as he held the ladder beside the car, while holding the steering wheel. He veered the car closer to the side of the road and tossed the ladder into an area of long grass where it vanished.

He rolled his shoulder, and then reached into his pocket for the green stone dragon eye and handed it to Elle. She looked down at the green stone artefact, polished it on her shirt and then held it up. It was in the shape of an eye with runic writing ornately carved with

symbols, waves, and dragon heads.

"*I see the heart*," she whispered, reading the ancient runes.

"What does that mean?" Anne asked.

"It means..." Elle's eyes slid to her and she slowly shook her head. "No, I don't know."

She rubbed its surface and then held her flashlight into its back. The object wasn't pure and had fragments inside it. Basically, it seemed to be just an average-quality piece of jade that had been carved into the shape of a human-sized eyeball.

"Great, we're thieves as well as vandals now," Anne groaned as she slumped in the back seat.

"That was exciting," Elle said. "Most fun in years."

Anne shook her head. "I feel like I just desecrated a church."

Troy half turned with a grin as he drove. "I dunno; I feel a bit like Indiana Jones." He shrugged. "But we lucked out this time."

"Back to the drawing board." Elle leaned back and closed her eyes, a small smile on her lips.

CHAPTER 15

In just half a day, they were back in Troy's hotel room in Edinburgh. Troy and Anne sat at the table with Elle slumped on a couch.

He sipped a coffee and stared off into the distance. With one hand he spun the jade eye on the tabletop. He spun it, it twirled and stopped. He spun it, it twirled and stopped.

After the fourth time, Anne reached out and grabbed his arm. "Hold it."

"Huh?" He shook away his reverie. "Sorry, was that getting annoying?"

"No." She reached over to take the eye from him and spun it herself. "Watch." It twirled around for a moment, slowed, but then stopped. Then it moved again, back the other way a fraction, and by itself.

"Hey." Troy frowned, and Elle sat up to watch.

"And again." She repeated the action, and once again the eye spun, stopped, but then repositioned itself. She grinned. "The eye is realigning itself. Always pointing in the same direction."

"That is just weird." Troy leaned on his elbows. "Unless it's like a compass."

"When I held it up to the light, I saw specks inside it. I thought they were little more than impurities," Elle said. "But maybe they were magnetic fragments."

"Impossible." Anne sat forward. "Vikings navigated by the stars and landmarks. They didn't use compasses and so for them they never existed."

"Wait a minute; I'm guessing the pupil is the front. And if it is, it's not looking, or pointing, north." Elle's frown deepened. "Remember what the urn told us: *look to the sea of Groen Land.*"

"A compass that doesn't point north. But is pointing to something else," Anne breathed. "Or to *somewhere* else."

Troy held the eye up again and squinted into it. "Whatever is inside this jade eye is looking north, but not true north. There's something magnetic up there. Or maybe, something with more attraction than the magnetic North Pole.

"*I see the heart.*" Troy looked from Anne to Elle. "Could it point the way to Lemuria? Is that what we're thinking?"

"Maybe it's pointing to something buried up there." Anne's eyes blazed. "Did you know that in 2018 they found the remains of an impact crater, fifty miles wide in the northwest of Greenland. It was buried under the Greenland Ice Sheet behind a glacier named Hiawatha. But it was young as far as giant impact craters go; only

around 3-million years. It's magnetic, but only weakly magnetic." She sighed. "But that's too young for what we seek."

"And in the wrong place. We think it's the east coast," Elle replied. "That's where the film was taken by my brothers where they encountered the Sjøorm, the sea creature."

"Too young," Troy snorted softly. "Too young for what?"

The group was silent for a moment more, with even Anne looking like she was brooding and only just keeping her thoughts behind her lips.

"Come on, say it," Troy grinned. "Anne...?"

Anne looked up. "Too young..." her gaze was unwavering, "...for living dinosaurs."

"Exactly," Troy replied. "But I like the theory. Something up there is magnetic or has some other force of attraction. Maybe it's an ancient asteroid or fragment of it." He looked deep into the jade eye's depths. "And something inside this thing is drawn to it."

"*I see the heart.*" Elle held out her hand and Troy placed the green eye in it. She held it up. "This is the *drekafinarri* – the dragon finder, and it is pointing the way. And not to some metallic meteor, but to Odin's heart."

Elle held it up to the light. "This is what Ulf Skarsgard used to find the mysterious island in his hidden sea. If we want to find it, we need to follow where the eye is pointing. We've gone as far as we can by urns, on the internet, or by satellites. We need to go there ourselves now." She raised her eyebrows.

Troy nodded. "Yeah, but a few things to think about first." He held up a hand, ticking off fingers. "Like, how do we get to northeast Greenland? And once there, how do we get to the sea of mist area?" He turned. "And once we find it - *if* we find it - what are we expecting to encounter? Do we disembark or stay on the boat? And just how long will we be there?"

Anne scoffed. "*Pfft*, long way to go to just stay in a boat and take a few happy snaps."

"I agree." Troy began to make notes on the hotel stationery. "And what do we need to take? And *who* do we need to take?" Troy put the pen down. "And when?"

"Now is the *when*," Elle replied. "Or at least in the next few weeks, as it's summer up there now. We wait a few months, and it'll be the onset of winter squalls, and then the temperature can drop to 20 below."

"We divide up the tasks," Anne suggested. "I can make a list of equipment. We'll undoubtedly be going ashore, and as we're not clear yet on exactly what that will look like, I can secure a lot of rough country, ice trekking, and caving equipment. I can borrow some more

from our field trip stores, and the rest we'll need to buy." She grinned at Troy. "You'll need to buy... for all of us."

"I'll pay," Elle said. "That is no problem."

"And wealthy as well; aren't you the complete package?" Anne mock smiled.

Troy chuckled. "Thank you, Elle, and that's enough Anne. But good idea; I can organise the flights to the north, and see if I can charter a boat..."

"No need," Elle interjected. "I know some guys with a boat we can charter. It's big, and the crew knows the waters better than anyone."

"Your brothers?" Troy asked.

"Of course," Elle nodded. "The guys who took that film. And already know where the basic area of the sea of mist is."

"Then they are definitely on the mandatory list." Anne clapped once and rubbed her hands together. "This is wild."

"Firearms?" Troy asked. "I'm not sure what we'll encounter, but the thing they hauled out of the water took off a man's arm in a blink. And don't forget there is still that asshole wandering round who killed old Blair."

Elle stood. "My brothers have guns. And spares."

"Fine with me," Troy nodded. "Better to have enough firepower, than not enough."

"We seem to have some work to do," Elle said. "What say we grab our homework and get started. We can meet in Troy's hotel bar tomorrow evening and compare notes." She crossed to where Anne had the shard of urn and picked it up.

"I still have more work to do on that," Anne protested.

"Not tonight. This is too valuable to leave behind." Elle replaced it into its soft cover cloth and then the satchel.

Anne sighed. "Okay, I'll start assembling what equipment we'll need – probably going to be a few trunk loads given the range of environments we might encounter." She looked up at Elle and rubbed her chin. "I think about a size 14..."

"12," Elle shot back from under lowered brows.

"Sure, in a pinch." Anne turned to smile teasingly at Troy. "I already know Troy's dimensions. Right, Troy?"

He laughed and shook his head. "You're terrible."

Anne gathered her things and left. A few minutes later, Troy accompanied Elle down to the front of the building and she declined a ride back to her hotel. It was still early, and a few people were milling about, so she decided to wave a taxi down.

Troy watched as a taxi stopped for her but could only pull in a good fifty feet further down from where she stood. Elle turned and waved and walked down to the vehicle. He was about to turn away, when

out of the shadows two huge men came at her fast.

From the sleeve on one of the men slid what could be a club or metal bar. Troy's old training took over and he was moving toward her in a split second.

"Elle!"

Probably the worst thing he could have done as she stopped and turned, allowing the two guys to catch her. One slammed the bar into the side of her head, and before she even hit the ground, the other was snatching the bag with the urn shard from her hands.

He also spent a few extra seconds taking the small bag that held her wallet and personal items. It allowed Troy to close in and in one more second, he was there.

From six feet out, Troy dived, drawing back his fist and allowing the full momentum of his body, shoulder, and arm, to throw it forward in a straight right. It struck the cheekbone of the guy that hit Elle with a satisfying crunch of bone.

It should have knocked the big guy out, and he went down, but only into a roll. And as Troy centred himself, something hit his own head that was harder than a fist. Stars exploded behind his eyes, and he went to his hands and knees.

His father had done amateur boxing when he was younger and the one thing he told Troy about being in street fights – boots were harder than fists, and legs were stronger than arms – so never stay down.

So he didn't.

He rolled away and came up like lightning, making his body like a spear, and used the top of his head to collide with the other guy's chin.

The second guy swore, in Dutch, and came at Troy in a flurry of fists and kicks. The guy was big and powerful, but Troy was faster and better trained, and easily lay several more blows on his eye socket and nose.

Then the pair of them lined up and began to spread to either side of him. Troy readied himself for the next attack, but a gunshot rang out, and the guy he had just head butted cursed again and put one large hand to his bleeding ear.

"Leave it," the first guy said, who now held the satchel.

Both men sprinted down the street as a crowd began to gather. Troy turned to see a groggy looking Elle holding a small gun in her hand. He ran to her as she was about to topple over and held her up.

"Those bastards; they took the urn," she seethed.

"Are you okay?" He lifted her hair and didn't see blood. He pressed her head and felt the egg forming there.

"Ouch," she winced. "They've got the damned urn." She lifted the gun again, as though contemplating a long-range shot.

Not a good idea with so many people around now.

“Forget it; we’re alive and okay.” He grabbed her arm and lowered the weapon. “Put that away; the police will be here soon.”

“No, no police; they’ll bog us down and we need to move quickly now.” She replaced the gun in her pocket and leaned against him.

“Where did the gun come from?” he asked.

She gave him a fragile smile. “I mentioned my ex was violent, didn’t I?”

“That violent?” He put his arm around her.

“Yes.” She let him lead her away. “I think I’ll take that ride after all.”

CHAPTER 16

Tygo smiled broadly as he was handed the satchel. But when he saw the missing bit from the top of Ord's ear the smile turned to a smirk.

"Ah yes, the little wasp has a sting."

He then took the bag to the large table in the center of the room and almost reverently reached in and lifted free the bundled cloth.

He lay that beside the bag and unwrapped it as carefully as if it was a baby's swaddling. When the urn was revealed, he took his hands off it but left them hovering just over it. His eyes burned with an almost feverish intensity.

"What was broken will be restored. Pathways hidden shall be revealed. And riches lost, shall be returned to their rightful owners," he whispered reverently.

He straightened and rushed to his own shard to bring it back to the table. He quickly pulled the blank piece free he had created in the 3D printer, discarding it to the floor without a second glance. He then fitted the two ancient shard halves together.

Tygo's expression went from elation, to confusion, to fury – it was immediately clear there was a segment missing, and where it was missing from was at a critical place in the tale of Ulf Skarsgard's voyage.

He quickly lifted the bag and checked the cloth it had been bound in - nothing. Tygo crushed it in one huge fist and slowly turned to Ord to speak through gritted teeth.

"You broke it." His fist holding the bag hung in the air and he took a step toward the man. "You lost a piece."

Ord rose to his feet, his face blanching. "No, my chieftain. We unwrapped it only to make sure it was the urn we had obtained. We never even removed it from the bag." He backed up a step.

There was a large hammer leaning against one wall. Its handle was stout dark wood bound by leather strapping, and on its large metal double faced head, it was covered in runic writing. Tygo turned to lift it, his forearm straining from the considerable weight.

Ord held his hands up. "There was no other shard. No missing piece. I swear it." His eyes darted to the urn with the single half fist-sized piece missing. "Look, my chieftain, the edges are age-worn. This segment has been missing a long time."

Tygo's eyes blazed with barely constrained fury, but he glanced over his shoulder at the Viking pottery. He stared, his body visibly shaking with rage. His teeth became bared, and he roared and swung the hammer, bringing it down on the edge of the thick tabletop,

smashing away a two-foot section in a thunderous explosion of splinters.

After his roar died down, he slumped and lowered the hammer. "Of course. It was too much to hope it had only been cleaved in two." His head came up, and he spoke wearily. "Where did you follow the woman and her male friend to? Who did they meet with?"

"After returning from Norway, they just stayed at the hotel. And there was one more woman still with them. From the museum," Lars answered cautiously.

"The museum?" Tygo paced for a moment. "They went to the Viking Museum in Oslo, and I think somehow were able to get access to a picture or maybe copy of the missing half." He stroked his beard for a moment.

He turned. "They must have also found out that the shard had a missing piece, and so they continued with their investigation." He turned to the table and picked up the urn. "They know something."

He read the ancient writing easily.

"Through the endless mist to the forbidden waters, to -- of Græn -- this is Greenland, where our kin settled a thousand years ago, when it was grasslands, and warmer. Like it will become again." He nodded and read on. *"Enter the valley of ice. There, Odin's Gate awaits – Look to the Drekaflinnari."*

Tygo scratched at his beard as his eyes narrowed. "The dragon's eye." His head came up slowly. "So, my forefather had a guide."

He finally lowered the urn. "What did they find that we missed?" The huge man paced for a moment. "We cannot get in front of them until we know more." He stopped. "Until we know more, we must observe, and follow, and be ready."

"What would you have us do?" Lars stood.

Tygo turned. "You do nothing." He smiled grimly. "Now it is my turn."

CHAPTER 17

Elle sat up, groaned, and touched her head with her fingertips, feeling the lump beneath her hair. She exhaled. "I'll kill him."

She then turned to look down at the sleeping figure of Troy beside her. Her lips curved into a small smile, not believing how quickly she was able to get him into bed with her.

She snorted softly. *Men are easy*, she thought.

She reached over to carefully lift the sheet and looked again at his muscled torso and strong stubbled jawline; she didn't regret it at all. He was a good lover.

She continued to examine him; he had changed, grown into a tall and handsome man. But there was so much behind his eyes – not so much a sadness, but a haunted expression telling of some sort of deep loss or tragedy. Plus, she thought he was keeping a lot back about himself.

She'd ask him about it one day. But not today.

She swung her legs over the side of the bed. Troy sighed and she felt his warm hand on her back.

"Sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to wake you."

Troy looked at the bedside clock. "It's 8 a.m., half the day is gone already." He sat up. "Hey, how's the head?"

"I feel like I've got a vodka hangover like I've not had since my Oslo University days," she laughed. "Without the fun of the drinking beforehand."

He reached over to part her white hair and feel her scalp. "Didn't break the skin. But you should get it checked out in case there's something serious – do you have a headache, nausea, double vision?"

"No, just a headache." She winced as she rubbed it with the tips of her fingers again. "But I'm more hurt about losing the urn. How stupid; we knew that someone might come after it. And someone violent." She looked up. "But how did they know who I was? Or where I was?"

Troy rolled toward her. "We've got to assume that whoever killed old Blair found some sort of clue as to who you were. I mean, I found your name on the sales receipt."

"I was overconfident. Stupid." She flopped back down on the bed. "Plus, I'm angry that I let myself be robbed in the middle of Edinburgh."

He propped himself up on his elbow. "There is an upside; we lost the urn but at least it was after we had a chance to study it. And we've still got the images."

"I guess," she said morosely and flopped back down and shut her

eyes.

“We’re a step ahead. And we should stay there, and to do that we’ve got a lot to get done,” he said and rolled closer. “Because the gate is open now, right now.”

She nodded, her forehead creased. “We can enter. And what worries me is that what’s in there can get out. Those corridors of warm water will soon extend on the global sea currents for hundreds or thousands of miles. The first thing we need to do is...”

He lowered his face to hers to kiss her.

She grabbed the back of his head to hold the kiss. Her tongue snaked into his mouth. She broke the kiss but kept her face close to his. She felt his growing arousal.

“Seems there’s something else more *pressing* to do first.” She reached down to slide his boxers off.

CHAPTER 18

Australia, east coast, Bondi Beach – 6am

Brad Williams trailed the rest of the group. He and his buddies always swam the length of the beach every morning, just out past the breakers.

As on most mornings, he was left behind because the other guys were stronger swimmers or had the stamina of teenagers even though they were roughly the same age.

Damn those cigarettes, he thought.

It was late spring, the water was getting warmer, and the surf was small. A few hundred feet further in from him, a group of surfers on long boards waited to be first to catch the swells, and though the bottom was a good thirty feet below him, and there were shark nets at least for three quarters of the bay's length, it still made him nervous – he'd absorbed too many of his father's stories of yesteryear about the huge great white sightings in the bay, and also being told too many times to remember that dawn and dusk was when 'the man in the grey flannel suit' came calling.

Brad lifted his stroke rate, but only for a while as his energy reserves were running low. The wetsuit he wore gave him a little extra buoyancy, but it caused drag in the water, and man, did he feel the burn across his shoulders. He didn't even know why he wore it this time of year.

He lifted his head and saw his friends were two thirds done and coming into the northern end of the bay, so for them it would start to shallow as they came over the sand banks.

But Brad was still in the deeper water and the sun, still lifting on the horizon, meant shadows ruled the watery depths below him.

From the corner of his eye, he spotted the movement further out in deeper water. He put it down to maybe the first ray of sunshine bouncing off something on the sea bottom; what, he had no idea.

The surge wave passed beneath him, and he could have sworn there was the hint of a shadow a little further in from him. He was only a few hundred feet from the start of the sandbank area, but the sun hadn't yet risen enough to throw down curtains of light to create golden ripples of light on the sandy sea bottom.

Brad had felt the same sensation before when a pod of dolphins had shot beneath him and turned to look sideways up at him, their mouths curved in that dolphin smile of theirs as if amused by his clumsy and slow swimming style.

But this one felt different, bigger, and longer lasting. And for some

reason this surge wave made his testicles shrivel in his wetsuit. He lifted his head again – *not far, not far*, he told himself. But he was well behind his buddies and the sandbanks, and a hundred yards out from the surf line and the board riders. Bottom line, he was alone.

He increased his stroke rate, a surge of adrenaline boosting his energy levels. He was eating up the distance and counting down the seconds until he saw the white shelf of the sand bar.

But then suddenly, the violent tug on his legs was both a shock and excruciating and felt like a hot vice – Brad spun in the water in time to see he was in the center of a growing cloud of blood – his blood – and there was a massive and ominous shadow seeming to hover in the depths.

He dropped his head to look beneath the water but couldn't make out the object through the blood cloud. He then quickly felt down his body and was relieved to find both legs intact, but the wetsuit shredded and pocked with holes – same as his legs.

Fuck this. "*Help!*" he screamed.

He paddled backwards, but the huge shadow stayed with him.

The thing was enormous, and he thought it was far too broad to be a shark and it didn't seem to be swimming, more just hovering mid water, as if watching him.

"*Help,*" he screamed again, higher pitched, and waved an arm over his head.

In just seconds the surf lifesaving drone was overhead, and he waved frantically to it. It buzzed lower, and when he looked back at the water, the shadow was gone.

Brad backstroked into the shore, and hobbled up the beach, leaving bloody footprints in the sand. He knew immediately he'd need stitches, a lot of them. He also knew that his days of early morning swimming were over.

The Bondi Beach surf lifesaving crew had used drones for the past two years to spot swimmers in distress, floating hazardous debris, and also, sharks. The quad propellor drones had speakers to relay messages, were camera equipped, and could even drop a single small flotation device.

The ambulance had taken Brad Williams to hospital and the lifesavers gathered around the small screen and stared at the images the drone had collected as they were buzzing the stricken swimmer – there was Williams and then just a dozen feet from him was a huge shadow with an odd body shape that must have been twenty feet long but extending from its front was a serpentine neck with the head alone, half again as long as the guy in the water.

Head lifesaver, Lawrie Wilson, turned to his friend, Simon Apps.

“I’ve seen everything from great whites and dolphins to sunfish, and everything in-between. But I have no idea what that thing was that attacked the guy.”

“Gotta be shadow distortion. Or maybe a glitch.” Apps just shrugged. “Must have been a shark.”

“Yeah, right.” Lawrie slowly straightened. “You see the wounds? Sharks cut you to ribbons with teeth like serrated knives. This guy’s wounds were made by something round, conical – they just made a lot of holes.”

Apps raised sandy eyebrows. “Killer whale?”

“Around here, *nah*.” Lawrie turned back to the screen. “Put on some extra patrols. And I want the drone straight back out there.”

CHAPTER 19

Anne dusted her hands off as she looked down at the huge pallet of equipment she'd assembled. There was cold weather gear, caving gear – with ropes, boots, gloves, as well as a few pair of night vision goggles. There were knives, and camping equipment such as tents, cookers, and even dried food packets and water purifiers. All in half a dozen oversized, black duffel bags.

She looked down at three sets of wetsuits, goggles, and flippers, and after a moment, shook her head.

"Hmm, can't see us going swimming in water that cold." She went to turn away but paused a moment more. She then included just the three pair of goggles into one of the duffel bags. "Won't hurt."

She put her hands on her hips, satisfied. It was a lot. Maybe too much. But she knew once they were wearing most of the cold weather gear, it would lighten the load. Besides, one of her lecturers at university had told them the first rule of field work was to 'be prepared for anything, so you are surprised by nothing'. It was good advice then and good advice now, she thought.

As she usually did when working on tasks that required concentration, Anne had switched her mobile off. She turned it on and two minutes later it rang – she looked at the number – it was Troy, and seeing it made her heart kick a little.

Stop it, stupid girl, she thought. *His eyes aren't on you anymore*. She straightened her back and answered. "Hi Troy."

"Anne, where were you?" he rushed. "I've been calling all night."

"Sorry, had my phone off," she snorted. "What's up?"

"Where are you now?" Troy demanded.

"I'm still at the museum, assembling the equipment. There's a mountain of..."

"Listen," he cut her off. "I don't want to alarm you, but we were attacked last night. The urn was stolen."

"What?" she pressed the phone harder to her ear.

"Big guys, Dutch or Scandinavian, I think. Hit Elle over the head, nearly cracked her skull." Troy's words came fast. "I suddenly thought that if they've been watching us, all of us, they'll know about you. And they may want to check out what you've been doing with us."

"They certainly might if they discover there's a piece missing from the combined urn shards." She felt her heart begin to race again, but out of fear this time. "Well that's just great."

"Look, it might be nothing, but these guys were big, fit, and your security guard is the wrong side of fifty."

"Sixty," she confessed. "Oh shit, and I've got the renditions."

“Send them to me,” Troy requested.

“Yeah thanks, Troy, nice to know your priority. If I get shot, at least you have your precious urn renditions, and so-long, thanks for everything, dear Anne. Is that it? Well fuck that,” she scoffed. “You come and get me.”

“We’ll do it now,” Elle said.

Hearing the other woman’s voice with Troy made Anne’s heart sink a little lower.

“Okay, yeah, good,” she sighed. “I’m going to take all the equipment down to the loading dock, meet me there. When you call, and I know it’s you, I’ll open the rear doors.”

“We’re on our way,” Troy said. “Call if you have any problems. Anything at all. And please leave your phone on.” He rang off.

Anne crossed to the desk computer, and quickly saved the full urn rendition to the small drive. She thought about keeping it with her, but then sent it to Troy anyway. Bottom line, she knew she could trust him.

Anne stuck the mini drive in her pocket, stared at the screen for a moment more, before deciding. “Bugger it.” She deleted everything from the computer. “That’s it, I’m out of here.”

Anne tossed her carryall bag on top of the fully laden trolley and groaned as she got the thing moving toward the maintenance elevator.

As she approached it, she saw the numbers start to descend – someone was calling it, and that didn’t make sense. Even old Watson, the night guard, would always use the stairs for extra security. He didn’t use the elevators.

“Oh no you bloody don’t.” She turned the pallet around and headed for the public elevator that she knew would be too small for the trolley. She called the car, and when it arrived, she quickly began to lift and throw the huge bags inside, grunting and swearing as she tried to move quickly. When she was done, she heard the maintenance elevator ping as it announced its arrival. She jumped in the public elevator, and hit the basement button, and then pressed herself flat against the far wall as the doors closed at a glacial speed.

Come on, come on, she breathed as they finally shut.

She watched the numbers change – she only had to go a few floors, but it seemed to be taking forever. She prayed the elevator car didn’t stop at a random floor – she bet her already galloping heart would explode if it did.

She pulled out her phone, and went to text Troy, but remembered there was no signal in the elevator’s fortified concrete shaft. She tapped her foot as she willed the carriage on, and after a seeming eternity finally finished her descent.

The elevator arrived and bounced softly, and the door slid back. She

eased her head out and saw no one in the garage basement area. The building wasn't that old, but the basement was large, empty, and not well lit – and tonight, it gave her the creeps.

“Go.”

She began to toss the bags out onto the floor. They were heavy and the muscles in her back screamed in complaint.

Once all six were out she followed them and reached in to lock the lift in place. Anne knew trying to lug all six bags to the car port was a fool's job, so she rushed out, darting back and forth until she found another empty cart.

She emptied it of an old computer, cables, and masses of folders and ran back to the pile of bags.

Once again, she lifted and stacked, lifted and stacked, and then shoved the trolley to the dock. She stopped long enough to try her phone again, and this time managed to send Troy a message: *I'm in the loading dock. Hurry.*

Almost immediately she got a reply: *We're almost there, 3-minutes, open the doors.*

She looked at her watch. Yes, she could do it.

The stillness was suddenly broken by the soft hum of the maintenance elevator being called to the 4th floor... *her floor.*

“Oh no,” she whispered.

Hurry, she texted again.

Anne left the trolley to move out to the rolling door of the garage entry to be ready for when Troy arrived. The downside was it meant she'd be exposed.

Behind her, the maintenance elevator arrived. But from behind the garage door the slit of darkness under the roller door was cut by the headlights of a car.

Shit, she thought. She had no choice. Got to be time now, she thought, and hit the garage door button on the wall. It slowly slid upwards exposing the ramp down into the basement loading dock car park.

Behind her, the maintenance elevator doors slid back. Thank God, she whispered as Troy came down the ramp. This time, he was by himself.

She heard a soft noise and swung back in time to see a shadow move. She froze, waiting several seconds, but there was nothing.

My imagination, she thought. She spun back to step out and wave Troy down.

The car boot popped open, and she ran back to where she'd left the trolley, and pushed it towards the car. Troy came and helped, and Anne felt dizzy from fear.

“Good work,” Troy said on seeing the bags. They pushed the trolley

to the trunk and began to throw the bags inside, and a couple also onto the back seat. She noticed one was open a slit and quickly zipped it closed.

“I think there might be someone in here,” she whispered.

Troy quickly turned about, and then slammed the trunk shut. “Well, they can stay here, because we’re gone. Like now. Get in.” Troy slid into the front seat and Anne in on the passenger side.

In seconds more they were up the ramp and gone.

Tygo watched the sleek black rental car exit the ramp. For such a huge man he managed to move with stealth and silence. While the woman had flagged down the car, he had secreted a tracking device in one of the bags.

He pulled out his mobile phone and opened the app. A grid was displayed, and a small red dot was seen moving away from his position.

“And now, there is no hiding.” He grinned through his bushy beard and walked up the loading dock ramp before the rolling door could close.

EPISODE 05

*“The truth is not for all men, but only for those who seek it” – Ayn
Rand*

CHAPTER 20

Keflavik Airport, Iceland

As Troy, Elle, and Anne stepped from the plane, they gritted their teeth against the icy blast.

Troy winced – Scotland’s got cold winds, damn cold, but there was nothing like a real Arctic breeze to redden the cheeks and sting the nose and chin. And don’t dare open your mouth or your teeth will ache like you’ve been kicked by a mule.

“Damn,” he said as he hunched over.

Elle laughed. “You’ve been living in luxury too long.”

“You don’t strike me as a local,” Anne added, sceptically.

“I’m not,” Elle said and nodded to a couple of large men waving from the car park on the other side of the gates. “My brothers are. But I visit when I can.”

After another thirty minutes of passing through customs and immigration, and waiting for the trunks of gear to arrive, they wheeled everything out to meet with Elle’s kin.

Troy noticed that there was very little family resemblance. Both men had dark beards undoubtedly as protection from the freezing sea spray, and their faces were already weathered even though he guessed they were only mid-thirties.

Elle dropped her bag and ran to hug the two men. With an arm looped over both of their shoulders, she introduced them – she first nodded to the tall man to her left. “Bjorn, my kid brother.” Then to the even bigger man on the right. “And Elrik, my big, *big* brother.”

They shook hands, and Troy thought his hand must have felt like soft kid leather even though he worked out, because these guys had hands that were large, strong, and there were so many callouses they felt like they were covered in bark.

Bjorn immediately took a shine to Anne and offered to help with her bag. Even her handbag.

In minutes more they were loaded into a pickup truck and headed to the old Port of Reykjavík built over 100 years ago. Today, much of the port was primarily for tourism, with shops and restaurants tucked in amongst the beautifully painted stores and houses, but it still was a working port.

Today, the freezing winds and iron-grey sky didn’t encourage tourists, and there were no gulls wheeling overhead trying to annoy scraps from the fishermen or dining visitors. There was just the clank of steel lanyards against masts and the splash of small waves against the dock.

Bjorn and Elrik laughed and chatted boisterously with Elle, obviously trying to catch up and they swapped between English and Dutch; each spoke over the other while Troy only grabbed snatches of their conversation.

They soon pulled up at the end of the dock and there were few people about. Some fishermen onboard their boats were performing maintenance tasks, and others were just sitting in wheelhouse cabins, drinking from steaming mugs, and smoking either pipes or hand rolled cigarettes. All waved and watched their party arrive.

Another young man came and met them and opened Elle's side door. He stood back and held his arms wide.

"*Min vakre, Elle,*" he grinned.

Elle jumped out and hugged him. "Jorgan, you look wonderful as ever."

The young man mock bowed, and Troy noticed he kept his eyes on Elle. An old boyfriend, he wondered. Or just another besotted man swept up in Elle's beauty?

Elle pointed to him. "A school friend of Elrik and Bjorn's who also liked to fish. And now they work together, fishing of course," she laughed.

Jorgan hiked his shoulders. "Do what you love, yes?"

Elrik went around to the rear of the truck and started hauling out bags and cases.

"Okay," he announced. "If everyone takes one or two bags, we can do it in one trip."

"Where to?" Troy asked.

"That one." Elle pointed to the largest ship on the wharf.

"Wow, that'll do," Anne said. She went to grab two bags, but Bjorn wouldn't let her and took three himself, with the handles of one over his shoulders like a backpack.

The 80-foot boat they headed towards looked old, but sturdy, and probably had been painted in the last few years. The name Arctic Princess was written on the side, and for now her net cranes, ropes, and gear were folded away.

Bjorn jumped to the deck and turned. "Including us, the Princess has a crew of eight. But the crew are off for now. So, just us," he said cheerily. "Oh, but one more onboard. Our veterinary specialist."

"You're bringing a vet. Why?" Troy asked.

Elrik waved the question away. "Ack, regulations." He lowered his voice to a conspiratorial level. "She also does work on people – no extra charge."

Troy scoffed. "Let me guess, your cook is also your mechanic."

"Yes, that's me," Elrik replied, deadpan.

"Is also my job," Jorgan added, just as serious.

“Good one, Troy. You sure know how to kill a mood.” Anne pretended to frown, but her lips curved a hint at the corners.

“We love everything you’ve done,” Elle said, and momentarily turned to Troy to scowl. “And thank you, my brothers, for making yourself and the crew available. Let’s get onboard, I can’t wait to see what you’ve done with her.”

Troy sighed. One dumb joke, and suddenly I’m the ship’s pariah, he thought.

The boat looked in better shape on the inside than it did on the out. Or perhaps the brothers had made an extra effort when they heard their little sister was joining them.

There was fresh paint, little clutter, plenty of space, and they were to use the crew’s cabins – compact, but comfortable. However, the beds were a maximum of six feet, so Troy’s six-two frame was going to have to bend a little. He wondered how Elle’s brothers fit, who were even taller than he.

After dropping their bags, they headed to the mess and the crew already had a radio playing unrecognisable Scandinavian tunes. On the table was a large bottle of clear but oily looking liquid.

There was also another crew member there, the vet, Troy assumed. It was a young woman, with hair pulled back, and the pale, sky-blue eyes that rarely blinked.

“I introduce Astrid.” Elrik poured a glass of the liquor and handed it to her.

The woman gave Troy the once over and then turned to the group.

“Haloo.” She raised her glass in greeting.

“Good.” Bjorn had more tumblers ready, and he began to half fill them.

“Aquavit.” Elle clapped. “I haven’t had it in years.” She kept watch as her younger brother finished pouring the liquid.

“What is it?” Troy asked.

Elle bobbed her head. “A potato-based liquor that is the Norwegian national drink.”

Elrik smiled wickedly. “A little like Schnapps, a little like vodka, and a lot like rocket fuel. So be careful, it’s got a kick.” He pushed a glass toward each of them and then lifted his, waiting.

Elle picked hers up and looked into it. “A 42% proof kick.”

“Whoa.” Troy took his and put it to his nose. He smelled caraway seeds and an herbaceous undertone that had hints of dill, fennel, anise, and clove. It reminded him a little of homemade rye bread.

“Skål.” Elrik raised his glass high momentarily and then downed it in one.

Everyone around the table did the same, including Elle in a single gulp. Troy followed and felt the hit on the back of his throat and the

bloom of warmth in his belly. It was good, real good.

Only Anne coughed and balked at downing the entire glass. She stuck her tongue out. "Rocket fuel is right." She coughed again.

Bjorn smiled broadly. "And yes, it will take you to the moon."

"And probably blind you." Anne grinned back at the tall young Dutchman. "But I guess I could get used to it."

"So." Elrik refilled the glasses. Only Anne kept hers in her hand. "What is this secret voyage that brings you home, little sister?" He toasted her and sipped again.

Elle also sipped. "Your film of the *Sjøorm* ... and a Viking legend." She turned and smiled at Troy. "Also, the promise of finding a mysterious island hidden beyond a valley of ice and mist."

"You seek Lemuria?" Bjorn guffawed. "Please, this myth is for children and tourists. You know this, Ellie."

"I'm betting it was his idea." Elrik nodded towards Troy.

"But what if it's not?" Elle began. "What if it's a real place that has been hidden for a thousand years, and is only now opening to us?"

"Many myths have a kernel of truth at their core," Troy added.

"Troy," Anne said.

"*Huh?*" Troy turned.

Anne smiled. "No, I mean the city of Troy. It was thought to be a myth, but after vanishing for over 3,000 years it was rediscovered in 1870 – it was real – the myth suddenly became reality."

"And you think that Lemuria is going to be your Troy?" Elrik's brow furrowed.

"No, more than that." Elle's eyes gleamed. "Troy was nothing but ruins when it was found. What we seek is beyond a myth, and instead a living, breathing place. A mysterious island, somewhere beyond Odin's Gate... which is open, waiting for us to go through."

"And if we don't, others will," Troy added. "It's got to be where your *Sjøorm*, your sea serpent, came from." He folded his arms. "And that was no myth, right?"

"The *Sjøorm* was real. But the rest...?" Bjorn shrugged.

Astrid lifted her chin, her mouth pressed into a line for a moment. "It certainly needs investigation." Her eyes went to Elrik. "Danny's missing arm attests to that."

"My poor crewman, Danny," Elrik sighed with a whoosh. "And I thought we were going fishing. Perhaps to try and catch another of those *Sjøorm*, or maybe it was a Russian alligator we netted?"

"Alligator," Anne scoffed. "I'm a palaeontologist and biologist at the Royal Scottish Museum. And that was no alligator." She finished her drink, coughed once, and slammed the glass down. She lifted her head. "Do you know what a mosasaur is?"

The three Dutchmen remained silent.

"I do," Astrid replied. "They were a group of large prehistoric marine reptiles that went extinct a long time ago."

"Correct. And they went extinct at the end of the Cretaceous period, about 66 million years ago." Anne nodded to the vet. "And it's my opinion that the thing you brought aboard the Arctic Princess was some species of that marine reptile."

Astrid folded her arms. "They're reptiles; it could never survive in these cold waters."

"You're right again," Anne nodded. "But I don't think the waters were that cold at the time. Also, it's not native to the wider Greenland seas, but came from somewhere else. Somewhere warmer, and somewhere close by."

"The warm water came from Lemuria," Elle added. "It might have created a corridor within the North Sea currents for it to live long enough to get to somewhere else."

"And you think it came from somewhere on frozen Greenland?" Elrik grinned. "And you want to try and find it?"

"Maybe not on, but somewhere *underneath* Greenland," Troy replied. "That's not frozen."

Bjorn shook his head. "We've fished these waters all our lives. And been in close to the mainland and a lot of its shoreline. There is no place like that. It's frozen solid. And that thing was an abomination. Something deformed maybe from that Chernobyl reactor breakdown."

"Seriously, you think that's what it was? Come on," Troy scoffed.

Astrid rounded on Troy. "There were giant mutated carp found in Chernobyl's nuclear cooling pond. It's not unrealistic to assume there could be other mutations."

"Any other time, I might agree with you," Anne said. "But that thing was no aberration or mutation. Based on my experience with the skeletal structures of mosasaurs, I'd say it was perfectly formed. There must be a breeding population. And it must have come from somewhere close by."

"Greenland is 1.35 million square miles. It's enormous," Troy replied. "We've been doing some research. The ice and snow up there is close to ten thousand feet thick. Some areas are too thick to be penetrated by radar mapping satellites, but others can, and we can see some of the unique hidden geographic morphology. Did you know that the ice cover there hides the world's longest canyon? It's 460 miles long, 2,600 feet deep and 6 miles wide."

Bjorn, Elrik and Jorgan glanced at each other. The brothers just shrugged.

Troy went on. "Did you also know that down there are lakes filled with crystalline meltwater, ranging in size from 656 feet across to 3.7 miles across – big and deep. And oddly, the water is warm; the experts

think it's maybe due to friction from the movement of ice or from geothermal energy from below. Just imagine what else is still hidden that we can't see or could never hope to burrow down to."

"Warmth and water," Anne repeated.

"The foundation for life," Astrid said softly.

"One more thing." Anne pinned the brothers with her gaze. "There are numerous significant impact craters hidden under all that snow and ice. We think one of them left some non-earthly fragments behind. Some sort of magnetic rock that is acting as our beacon."

"Beacon? What are you talking about?" Elrik asked.

Troy pulled the jade eye from his pocket. "This is a *drekafinnari*, a dragon finder. A thousand years ago, it belonged to Ulf Skarsgard, and he regarded it as his all-seeing-eye. It showed him the way, and it will do the same for us."

Bjorn sniggered. "I think you have had too much aquavit."

"Really?" Troy lay the green eye on the table. He spun it, and after a moment it stopped. And then sure enough it repositioned itself, and pointed, not quite north.

The three men stared.

"Maybe it's a compass, maybe it isn't," Elle said. "But whatever it is, when we're in the mist, this should show us the way to Odin's Gate."

"Where our sea monster escaped from," Bjorn said softly. "We don't want any more of those in our sea."

"Maybe too late for that," Troy replied.

Bjorn looked up. "Then there will be more like Danny who lose their limbs. Or worse."

"Question." Astrid had her arms folded as she stared at the green eye.

"Yes?" Troy asked.

"Then what?" The vet tilted her head. "Then what do you expect to happen?"

"We go through the gate of course," Elle smiled. "To find Lemuria, the mysterious island."

CHAPTER 21

On the Reykjavík wharf, Tygo and his three hulking men were inside the Kaffibarinn Bar and all four watched the boat with an unblinking intensity. Also at the table was Svenson Olgarr, owner, captain, and operator of the fishing vessel, The Hildur.

Tygo had chartered it for a week, and right now, the crew were loading their equipment onboard. At the museum he had seen what the other group were taking, and he had matched it, not yet knowing what it was all for, but wanting to be ready for anything.

The captain drained his beer and slammed the empty glass down. "One more for the road." He grinned at Tygo and slid his mug toward him.

Tygo looked down at him as if he were a bug for a second or two, before breaking into a smile that never reached his eyes.

"Of course." He nodded to Lars who went to get the man another drink. While they were still in at dock, Olgarr held the whip hand. But Tygo knew that as soon as they were on the water, then things would be different.

The huge Viking's eyes slid to the captain. "Are you all fuelled up?"

Olgarr shared a tobacco-stained grin and nodded as the next beer was pushed in front of him. "The boat, yes, and I will be as well." He took a deep gulp of the frothy beer and smacked his lips. "And as you requested, we have spare fuel onboard. We are ready to go."

The man's cackle lifted his stained beard as he leaned forward. "And if you would like to pay for anything else, I am happy."

Tygo ignored the little man and turned back to the window to watch the Arctic Princess finish its preparations – when they moved, he'd move.

In another hour the team aboard the Arctic Princess was ready to go. Jorgan and Bjorn cast off the bow and stern ropes while Elrik lodged his departure notification. Elrik then backed the boat out, expertly guiding the large vessel through the crowded moorings.

The winch was folded back, and the nets stowed but on deck they had several drums of fuel, as Elle had suggested they may need to travel 700 miles, and then some.

By the time they left the port harbour it was evening, the wind had dropped, and the water was glass smooth. The weather was expected to be fair for the coming week.

Elrik's plan was first to get them up to where the perpetual mist now hovered over the water off the coast of northeast Greenland. Then it was up to Elle, Anne, Troy, and his mystical *drekafinarri* to

guide them from there.

As they had disembarked late, the brothers and Jorgan would take shifts at the wheel while the passengers could catch some sleep. All things being well, and travelling around the clock, they should arrive at or close to their destination tomorrow around late morning.

Elrik checked the radar and saw a few other vessels out, which wasn't unexpected this time of year as Reykjavik was still a working port after all, and there would also be fishing boats dotted about looking for any late shoals, at least for the first quarter of their voyage.

Only Astrid shared the wheelhouse cabin with him, and after slipping from her coffee mug, he felt her turn to him.

"Do you believe them?" she asked.

He faced the front window for a moment before turning with a wry smile. "I believe there will be something. If it was just that Troy Strom or the other biology woman, then probably not. But Elle was the sensible and smart one of us. She would not be tricked or try and trick us." He turned back to the window. "Plus, there was that thing we netted. I know in my gut that it was no alligator or mutation."

"We all know that but refused to say it out loud." She nodded. "Yes, I believe them too. And that beast had to come from somewhere. So why not a hidden place that is suddenly being revealed due to the Arctic melt for the first time in a thousand years?"

Astrid stood a little closer and laid a hand on his arm. "When we get there, what are we supposed to do? Just wait for them... and for how long?"

He nodded for a moment with his mouth turned down. "Let me ask you a question; do you think my little sister will be safer with or without her brothers with her?"

"Safety in numbers, sure." She smiled. "But she'll be even more secure with a vet specialist with some medical skills."

He laughed softly. "Then it's settled. Jorgan can mind the boat. And we will accompany them on their adventure."

She lifted her mug. "To the mysterious island."

CHAPTER 22

Troy came awake and for the first few seconds was disorientated, but then the smell of diesel and grease, the thrum of the engines, and the tiny, steel box of a cabin he found himself in brought him back to reality.

He turned his head and saw the compact table with his wristwatch, glass of water, and the green eye from the Skidbladnr's prow – the *drekafinnari* – still pointed somewhere north, but not true north.

He reached out and gave it a half turn. It immediately righted itself to repoint in the direction they were still heading. He turned it again and before he removed his fingers, he felt it moving – the attraction was getting stronger.

"What can you see, little one? Where are you taking us?" he asked the green orb. But the eye remained mute and focussed.

"I see the heart," he whispered.

Troy then threw his legs over the side of the bed and immediately felt the surprising warmth from the steel floor – the engines, he guessed.

He reached for his watch and slid it on – it was still only 6.15am and he remembered that breakfast was at 6.30am in the main mess. And it must have been the sea air or yesterday's long voyage, but frankly he was starving. He quickly dressed and headed out in search of a coffee.

One more thing he needed. He reached into his pack and took out the gun, a Sig Sauer P228 – always had been his weapon of choice – it was effective, reliable, and took a 9mm parabellum slug. The gun was small enough for easy concealment, but with good stopping power.

He couldn't bring a gun through UK customs and immigration, but the CIA had shown him where there were dealers internationally able to sell the best quality firearms. He tucked it into the small of his back.

As he came through the oval bulkhead door, he saw the mess was already full, except for Jorgan who was pulling the latest wheelhouse shift. Elle winked at him and turned to the coffee urn to pour him a tin cup full. She handed it to him.

"Good morning, at last," she smiled. "The day's half gone."

He inhaled the dark liquid – it was strong, and there was a hint of fish and engine oil in the brew. But when he sipped, it hit the spot.

"Ahh, that's better," he said. "What did I miss?"

"Twenty miles to go," Elrik announced. "Nearly there."

"Very good," Troy replied.

"Soon, we enter the sea of mist. And it is not a safe place as the fog

is thick and hangs like a grey curtain over everywhere and everything. Visibility is very bad, so it'll be up to your all-seeing eye to guide us from then. We'll be travelling at quarter speed – even though the ice has receded, there'll still be waterline bergs that could rip out our hull if we're not careful.”

Anne turned. “Once we're closer, *um*, do we take a rubber raft, or will we be dropped ashore? How does it work?”

“Closer to what, is the question,” Bjorn replied. “I think first we have to find the entrance...”

“Odin's Gate,” Troy added.

Bjorn nodded. “If it exists.”

“And if the gate exists, we assume, based on your research of the *Skidbladnr* voyage, it can only be entered by the sea. So, that's how we go in.” Elrik's eyes were on Troy.

“That's the plan.” Troy nodded, but then his head came up. “We?”

“Of course,” Elrik replied. “You think I'm going to let my little sister go inside a place where that sea dragon might have come from with just you, and Ms. Walsh as bodyguards?” He tilted his head to Anne. “No offence, Ms. Walsh.”

“Nope, not a chance.” Troy shook his head.

“Troy,” Elle sighed. “It's a good idea. We don't know what we'll be facing, but there are no two more able bodied people who we can trust with our lives, than my brothers.”

“Three, counting a vet.” Astrid lifted her chin. “With medical experience.”

Troy quickly thought it through. “Look, I agree with your sentiment, but the more people involved, the less chance we have of keeping this secret. Plus, it'll slow us down.”

“I disagree; your secret it will remain,” Bjorn replied. “But Mr. Strom, where Elle goes, we go.” He looked at Troy from under his brows. “This is a captain's call, and aboard this vessel, that is what matters.”

Anne lifted her hand. “I don't mind, gets my vote.”

Elle nodded. “Mine too.”

“Five against one,” Bjorn observed.

Troy knew he really had no good argument and was just going to end up sounding pig-headed. “No, no, it's six against no one. You're right and thank you for offering to assist us. Elle's correct and we really have no idea what we'll be facing, if or when, we find this entrance.”

“And,” Bjorn added, “we have guns.”

From overhead the internal intercom crackled.

Elrik, the mist wall is dead ahead.

Elrik picked up the microphone handset and clicked it open. “Very

good, Jorgan. I'm coming up." He hung the handset up. "And so, we enter the unknown. Perhaps you can join us in the wheel room, Mr Strom. And bring Ulf's all-seeing-eye with you; we will be blind, but hopefully Ulf's eye will not."

They climbed to the wheelhouse and almost immediately the radar and sonar crackled and the images began to fragment.

"Here we go. Just like before," Jorgan said.

"Ease back to 3-knots," Elrik said. "Bjorn, get out on deck and spot for us."

"On it." His brother grabbed the field glasses and pushed open the door, edging along the gunwale railing and then standing on the deck in front of the wheelhouse. He held the glasses to his eyes and held an arm out, gently motioning one way or another as they navigated around shipping container-sized bergs that were right down at the seawater level. Bjorn moved the large deck spotlight over the water where Jorgan pointed.

"Last time, just before we entered the mist, our GPS positioned us at about five miles from the Greenland coastline. At this speed, we should start to get close to land in the next thirty minutes," Elrik snorted. "As long as we don't hole the bow."

"Was this where you caught the mosasaur? *Ah*, I mean your sea monster?" Anne corrected.

"Yes, close to here," Elrik replied and half turned.

Troy placed the green eye on the control panel top close to Jorgan. "Follow where it points."

The young man glanced at Elrik, who nodded.

"The mystical dragon finder," Jorgan snorted softly. "We will see then." He kept watching for Bjorn out on deck, but now also glanced down at the green eye. The object with the runic pupil shifted slightly, and Jorgan turned the wheel until the eye was pointing dead ahead again.

After another ten minutes, Bjorn out on deck waved them down.

"Cut the engines," Elrik announced.

The thrum of the engines stopped, and the boat glided forward. Bjorn raised a hand and then closed it to make a fist.

"Reverse to all stop." Elrik frowned into the impenetrable mist that seemed even thicker now. On deck, Bjorn was starting to vanish in the fog even though he was just a dozen feet in front of them.

Jorgan stayed at the wheel, moving the cabin roof light over the water, but Elrik grabbed an additional powerful flashlight, and Troy, Elle, Astrid, and Anne joined Bjorn out on deck.

"What can you see?" Elrik asked, flicking on the beam, and aiming it into the heavy mist. It did little good, and just illuminated the billowing clouds surrounding them.

Bjorn half turned. "What can I see? Nothing." He inhaled. "But I can smell something."

The group all inhaled – sure enough, the sea mist carried other scents beside brine – there was plant sap, earthy soil, and something else that might have been stagnant water.

"I've smelled that once before," Astrid said. "In a jungle."

Elrik walked closer to the railing and looked over the side. "There's no bergs here." He lay down and held a hand out flat over the water. After a moment he turned to them. "I knew it; the air is still cold here, but I can feel warmth coming off the water. No wonder there are no bergs."

"Warm water feeding out of Odin's Gate," Elle breathed. "Lemuria is here, somewhere."

"We must be close now," Bjorn said. "There will still be ice cliffs, so we need to be very careful. The warm water might cause them to calve; they'd swamp us."

"He's right." Elrik turned. "We can't risk the Princess. If we want to go in any closer, we'll need to take to the inflatables."

"Good idea," Troy said.

"Is that safe?" Anne asked. "I mean, we'll be more at risk closer to the water line. You know, where the mosasaur was."

"You'll be fine." Bjorn smiled. "I won't let anything happen to you."

"How about that?" Elle grinned. "You've got a bodyguard and a date all in one."

"Break out the boats. Bjorn, you get Mr. Strom and Anne. I'll take Elle and Astrid." Elrik turned to Jorgan. "And you get to mind the Princess."

"I get the boring jobs." Jorgan rolled his eyes. "At least bring me back something interesting."

CHAPTER 23

Tygo stood in the wheelhouse next to Captain Olgarr as the older man kept one hand on the wheel, and one squinted eye on his instruments.

“Can’t see a damn thing,” the small captain complained. “Worst fog I’ve ever seen. This is why I don’t come out this far. I’m risking everything.” He peered out through the window at the billowing, white mist.

“Stay the course,” Tygo said as he watched his tracking screen. “We’re not far behind now.”

There was a heavy thump against the hull they all felt through the soles of their boots, and Captain Olgarr cursed. “And there’s waterline bergs out there, I’ll hole me fucking boat.” He seethed. “You’re not paying me enough to sink the Hildur, it’s all I got.”

“We paid what you asked,” Tygo replied as he focussed on his tracker. “Shut up and earn your money.”

“Nope, the cost of dry-docking my boat to check for damage will eat up my profits. You need to pay me more,” Olgarr cut the engine and the Hildur slowed, “or I turn her around.”

Tygo exhaled as he lifted his head from the tiny tracking screen. Sven and Ord were below preparing their kit, but Lars was in the wheelhouse with him. The pair of huge men filled the cabin space.

“We are nearly there, and I think we can find our way without you now.” Tygo turned to Lars. “Take this insect up on deck, cut his throat, and throw him over the side.”

“What?” Olgarr blanched.

Lars grabbed the small man and with one hand lifted him so just his toes danced on the floor.

“Wait, no, I was only joking.” Olgarr’s voice became higher as he was pushed roughly through the door.

In seconds more, Tygo heard the wet gurgle of a cut throat, and then a splash. Lars returned a few seconds later, with blood on his sleeve.

“Looks like we have a new captain,” he grinned and saluted.

Tygo chuckled. “The Arctic Princess is less than half a mile from us. And they’ve stopped. We need to be quiet from now. Lower the boat, we will paddle from here.”

CHAPTER 24

It took them another twenty minutes to ready the boats with their equipment. Troy, Elle, and Anne donned their jungle suits underneath their cold gear and stocked their large packs.

Astrid, Elrik, and Bjorn only had their toughened work gear, but both men had rifles, and Elrik a handgun. They also took some emergency flares, and walkie talkies.

Troy was surprised and impressed by the inflatable boats. He had expected some crappy old sagging craft, but these looked ex-military, about 14-feet in length and nearly six wide. They had aluminium ribbing for extra support, plus outboards.

For now, they planned to row to keep the noise down and allow them to be more reactive and aware of their surroundings – important as they were still travelling blind.

The boats were lowered over the gunwale, and they loaded them and then followed their gear. Troy held the green eye in his hand and once again it turned and pointed to the west.

He lifted an arm. “That way.”

Everyone used a paddle and they stroked on for the next half hour.

“Something up ahead,” Bjorn said.

He didn’t need to say it as they all felt it before seeing it – rising like some sort of colossal, white wave before them was a wall of ice, hundreds of feet high, but its top was shrouded in the mist.

Troy looked down at the *drekafinnari*. It had moved to point northwest now along the wall.

“That way.” He pointed and they followed its lead up the ice coast.

After another thirty minutes of paddling, they saw it.

Both boats came together, and the twin crews rested as they stared into the massive crack in the ice wall. It was an impenetrably dark rift that looked to have steam billowing from it.

The eye pointed straight into its dark interior.

“In there,” Anne whispered.

The rip in the mighty ice wall was around 60-feet wide, and as they watched, a huge block of ice fell from one of the sides to splash into the water, sending a small wave back at them.

“Dangerous,” Elrik said.

“The pathway to Odin’s Gate, and Lemuria,” Elle laughed softly, ignoring her brother. “Where the *Skidbladnr* went a thousand years ago.” She looked to Troy. “Is there really a mysterious island in there?”

“Only one way to find out; what are we waiting for?” Troy gripped his oar.

“Wait,” Elrik said. “I wish we could report to Jorgan; let him know what is going on.”

“We can’t as the comms are scrambled out here,” Troy said. “Hey, how’s this...” he turned to the elder brother, “...we do a first reconnoitre. If it looks safe, we send one boat back to report in, and pick up any additional equipment we may need.”

Elrik nodded. “Okay, good; first we do a scouting entry. Then if safe, we can return for a longer mission. Agreed?”

They all nodded.

Troy faced the huge rip in the ice wall and stared into the impenetrable darkness beyond. “Then let us see where Odin hid his mysterious island.”

He sucked in a breath, and then dug his oar into the water, and the pair of rubber rafts entered the darkness of the rift.

The paddlers in both boats stroked slowly, pulling the water back, and then lifting their oars carefully to barely cause a ripple. Elrik took the lead, and as they ventured between the colossal walls of ice, what little light there had been faded to a foreboding darkness.

Elle, Anne, and Troy placed headband lights over their foreheads, and Astrid held a powerful waterproof flashlight.

After a few hundred feet the crack in the ice wall opened into a lake-like pool of water, at least a hundred feet around. Rain poured down from above.

“Feel it?” Elrik asked Elle and Astrid.

“Yes, it’s warm in here,” Elle replied and looked up. “That’s not rain, we’re under the ice pack and that’s ice melt from the frozen roof. But it’s opening more by the day.”

“Will it cave in?” Elrik asked.

“I hope not. But I think it’s too thick to totally collapse.” Troy shone his light up at the ceiling, but it was lost in the dark mist. “But that doesn’t mean it won’t lose a huge chunk of ice now and then.”

“Let’s hope it waits until we have passed by.” Elrik stroked a little harder.

In another few minutes the mist had lifted a little and their visibility now extended to the far side of the internal lake.

“Over there.” Astrid held up her flashlight.

At the far side of the body of water was a large stone cave mouth looking to be about fifty feet across, and forty high. If the ice cave they were in now was dark, this new cave was so lightless it could have been painted black.

Bjorn brought his boat closer to the other. “You see it?” he asked.

“Yes, the cave, and our destination,” Elle replied. “And big enough for a Viking ship to enter. Let’s go.”

Troy scanned the calm body of water. Vapours rose from it, attesting to its warmth, and due to the twilight illumination, it was impossible to see below its inky surface.

“Can I suggest we move around the outside of the ice lake, close to the cave walls? That thing you netted probably came from inside that cave, and these inflatables aren’t made for fighting sea monsters.”

Elrik looked from Troy to the water. “Good idea.”

The pair of boats edged around the internal lake and soon found themselves at the mouth of the cavern. They slowed.

“Oh wow, look.” Elle pointed to the rock at the top of the cave.

“That’s ancient Norse,” Elrik said, but then shook his head. “I can’t read that form of runic writing. Far too old.”

“A very ancient form of writing. They’re called petroglyphs – words and images carved directly into the rock.” Anne pointed her forehead flashlight, but also fumbled for another smaller light she clicked on, held in her fist, and pointed the beam. “But they look much older than the Viking era.” She began to move her light. “There are plenty of notable scientists who believe that the roots of the Viking culture extended back all the way to the bronze age, some 5,000 years.”

“That old?” Bjorn frowned. “I’ve never heard this.”

“It’s true,” Troy said. “In fact, there are the famous petroglyphs on a coastal wall just outside Fredrikstad, in south-eastern Norway, that depict Viking-like long ships, but without sails. They had the tell-tale dragon prow. And they’ve been dated as being well over 5,000 years old – as old as the pyramids.”

Bjorn whistled, the high notes carrying right across the still water.

“I think the Vikings have been coming here for many millennia.” Troy turned. “Ulf Skarsgard wasn’t the legend. He was following an even more ancient legend laid down by his own distant ancestors.”

Bjorn looked up at the symbols. “We can’t understand what they were telling us.”

“I think I can. We can.” Elle turned to Troy. “I just can’t get the start. Can you try?”

“Okay.” Troy examined the symbols and images carved in an arc over the cave entrance. “I’m probably getting a lot of this wrong, but here goes.” He found what he thought was the start of the short message. “*All who enter the dragon’s lair,*” he shifted, “*are owned or belong to the dragon,* maybe.”

Anne scoffed. “About as joyous as: *abandon hope all ye who enter here.*”

Troy nodded. “Yeah, but the Vikings had different types of demons.” He turned back to the dark cave mouth and lifted his head. “I can smell land.”

Elrik nodded. “There’s a warm breeze coming from inside this

tunnel. It must lead to the surface.”

“If it did, it wouldn’t be a warm breeze,” Elle replied. “It’s frozen solid up there.”

Troy shone his light inside the tunnel-like cave for another moment. “Well, we go on, unless anyone has any objections, state them now.”

He waited, but everyone’s eyes were firmly fixed on the dark cave mouth.

“Okay then. We take it slow... and silent.” Elrik pushed off, and behind him Elle and Astrid began to paddle.

Behind them in the next boat, Bjorn, Troy, and Anne followed.

Just a few dozen feet inside the cave mouth all light was lost and they needed to rely on their lights. They pushed their hoods back as the temperature rose quickly but traded it against getting soaked as water still dripped from the ceiling.

“Where’s the warmth coming from?” Bjorn asked. “What could cause this phenomenon?”

“Maybe hot springs or some other geothermal activity,” Troy replied.

“Or the meteorite that fell here millions of years ago. They can retain radioactive heat forever,” Anne said softly. “Anyone bring a Geiger counter?”

Troy scoffed. “You even packed us spare socks and you forgot a Geiger counter? Thanks, Anne.”

She laughed softly. “Yeah, and I also didn’t pack a parachute, and my favorite fry pan.”

“All doesn’t matter now,” Elle replied. “We’re committed.”

The cave became a wide grotto with a low hanging ceiling. Elrik managed to maneuver the boat along one of the walls and stopped at a grotto. He lifted his flashlight.

“Holy shit,” Bjorn scoffed. “They were really here.”

Inside an alcove was a skeleton, seated or slumped on a throne-shaped outcrop of rock. On its head was the remains of a metal helmet and a long-corroded weapon that might have been an axe leaned against the body. Over its now skeletal shoulders there was what might have been a fur but was now just colored streaks of fungal growth.

“This is as far as this warrior got,” Elrik whispered.

“It’s like he was keeping watch,” Troy added.

“Maybe he was. He was probably placed here so his spirit was to keep watch over the longboats – either coming or going,” Elle said, and then turned. “It’s just like the legend of Lemuria – Odin would send his warriors to this place to see if they were worthy to pass through his gate.”

“And was this guy worthy or not?” Elrik asked.

"Maybe his battle was over, and his spirit had already crossed over," Anne said. "Look at the leg."

One was missing. There were the remains of a single boot and the other was just a shard of sharp bone sticking out.

"Something in here took his leg off. Probably what killed him," Elrik said. "Everyone keep their eyes open."

They continued for another twenty minutes with the atmosphere growing warmer and more humid by the second. The cave also opened out.

"This place is huge," Troy remarked as he lowered the zip on his jacket. "Easily big enough for several longboats to enter." He shone his light up at the ceiling. "There's mosses or some sort of plants growing up there."

"Thriving in the warmth and humidity. They're the basis of food chains," Anne added. "As there's no light down here, so likely some species of lichen or moss that's probably feeding on mineral leakage from within the rock."

Elrik dug his oar in, and then cursed as his arm jerked. "Ach, just hit something."

"I hope it was the bottom," Astrid asked.

"I don't think so." Elrik continued to stare into the black water.

"Did it feel like you hit something, or something hit you?" Anne whispered as she also looked out over the water.

Everyone stopped paddling and the boats glided for a moment. The group turned about slowly. And then the lead boat lifted a foot in the air and then thumped back down in the water.

"Not good, got something in here with us," Elrik said. "Mr Strom, keep us moving." Troy dug the paddle in deep and pulled hard as Elrik snatched up his rifle.

Behind them Bjorn did the same, as Astrid and Elle paddled, but did so while keeping their bodies back from the sides of the small dinghies.

"Can't see a thing – black as ink down there," Elrik exclaimed.

Troy also stared over the side. "Yeah, well, from down there our lights will be standing out like beacons."

Elrik turned. "Should we switch them off?"

"No, I think we should keep moving, faster, because no one wants to end up in the water right now." Troy paddled harder and pulled his oar deep along the side of the boat.

Whatever bumped their raft didn't bother them again, and within another twenty minutes, Elrik raised a hand and the paddling stopped.

Silence settled over the two boats, except for the plink of water dropping down on them.

"What is that?" Astrid asked. "Smells weird."

“Is that more ice melt?” Elrik asked.

Drops fell around them, creating small splashes on the dark water’s surface, and drumming on their raft’s skin. Elle held a hand out, felt a drop strike and then took off a glove to dab a finger in it. She rubbed her finger and thumb together and then lifted it to her nose.

“Phew. That’s not water.” She wiped it on her pants leg.

“What’s it smell like?” Anne asked.

“Smells like... *yech*. Vomit.” Elle waved her hand in the air and her thumb and forefinger stuck to each other. “It’s also very sticky.” She wiped her hand hard on her shirt and then quickly dipped her hand over the side into the water.

“Probably some sort of mineral seepage dropping from the ceiling, I’ll bet,” Anne said.

“If it’s just seepage, then why is it just falling on us?” Troy asked and pointed his light out at the water’s surface. Sure enough, it just seemed to be in a twenty-foot area around the boats.

“I have a bad feeling about this.” Astrid was looking around slowly.

“We’re probably under a seam.” Anne lifted her flashlight and switched it on.

She screamed.

In the beam of her shaking light there was something only ten feet above their raft that looked like a long, pale, revolting pillow. And worse, it was slowly lowering itself down on a glistening thread. Everyone raised their lights and illuminated the ceiling above them.

Directly over them was around half a dozen huge grub-like creatures, many in silken cocoons on the cave ceiling, but more lowering themselves down towards them. It became clear then where the sticky rain was originating – from the horrifying worms’ mouths between large, curved pincers was some sort of dripping saliva, perhaps slavering in anticipation of the feast to come.

The cave ceiling was plastered in a mesh of web, and in those few chaotic seconds of dancing lights, they saw ancient skeletons caught in the mesh, or more likely, reeled in from the deck of centuries past, Viking ships, and now left as grisly mementos of previous meals.

“Shoot, shoot!” Elle screamed, and Elrik and Bjorn began to fire into the large pillowy bodies.

Troy dove a hand into his pack and pulled out a flare gun. He quickly jammed one of the fat flare plugs into the cylinder, snapped it shut, and lifted it.

“*Fire in the hole.*” He fired, straight up.

The flare shot upwards, missed all the grubs, but on striking the ceiling with the webbing highways and cocoon homes of the massive monstrosities, burst into flames.

The fire spread quickly on the thick silk, and for moments

illuminated the entire cave, showing all the bodies of animals and humans who had been trapped in the past. But the spreading fire also burned through the threads the huge maggot-like creatures were using to try and drop down on the boats.

Giant worms splashed into the water, one only just missing them by a few feet. But when it surfaced, it used a strong, snaking motion to push itself towards the closest raft. The others did the same as the creatures looked for the closest dry land – their boat.

“Oh, shit.” Troy lifted his paddle, getting ready to repel the monstrous boarders.

But they didn’t need to. From below, there was an upwelling of water, and the grub just on their gunwale vanished.

Then another, and soon, the water around them was boiling as whatever had been below the surface began to enjoy the free bounty that had fallen into their midst.

In seconds more the fire above them burned out, returning them to darkness. The grubs were all gone, and just a few lapping waves sloshed up against the side of the raft as the only evidence they had ever been there.

Troy slumped back, and after a moment lifted his light. There were no more grubs and only a few spots with crowded glistening balls glued to the roof that might have been clutches of eggs.

He laughed softly, and lowered his light. “That was intense.”

Astrid continued to shine her light up at the ceiling of the vast cave. “Those things were going to try and snatch us from the boat. And given the remnants of the bodies up there, they’ve been doing it for a long time. Centuries.”

“Millenia,” Elle replied.

“*Lampyris noctiluca*,” Anne breathed heavily.

Astrid scoffed softly. “Glow worms.”

Anne nodded. “Or some monstrous version of them. They feed by using sticky threads to reel in their prey.”

“Well, they messed with the wrong crew this time.” Elrik lifted his paddle again. “Let’s get out of here.”

The group dug in their oars and moved their rafts forward for another few minutes before Elrik stopped paddling and sat straighter. He spoke over his shoulder. “Turn the lights off.”

Bjorn looked around. “Please tell me not more worms.”

“No. Just do it,” his brother urged.

One by one the flashlights and headlights winked out. Troy’s was last. The darkness closed in on them. But then their eyes adjusted.

“There’s light.” Elle grinned, her teeth glowing white in the dark. “We’re coming out.”

“Shush,” Elrik waved them down to silence. “Listen.”

The group remained still and quiet. The last drip of water from their oars stopped, and a few of them held their breath. Then they heard it.

Insects, Troy thought. He concentrated and was sure there was the thrum of insect song. Either crickets or cicadas. It reminded Troy of sitting on back verandas on warm, Kansas summer evenings. *But they were a long way from Kansas*, he thought.

“Let’s move. Nice and slow,” Elrik said. “And let’s keep the talk down a little.”

They stroked forward, and every dozen few feet, the cave lightened even more. And then came the scent of sweet blooms intertwined with rotting vegetation, and earthy aroma smells like those of rich earth after it had rained. It recalled memories of living things burrowing through moist soil, crawling under leaves, or rotting logs, and broad forest floors.

But there was something else. When Troy was a kid, his dad had taken him to the Los Angeles Zoo, and they’d spent some time in the rainforest enclosure. Growing up he’d seen frogs, and snakes and lizards before, but in that rainforest room, they passed by the reptile enclosures, and for the first time in his life he had smelled them – just them – it was musky, cloying, and a little unpleasant. He smelt that now.

“We’re coming out,” Elrik said softly, maybe only to himself.

They came to the end of the cave and Elrik pulled them in towards a lip of stone still inside the cave mouth. Bjorn pulled his boat up next to them.

Elle took the opportunity to reach out to squeeze Troy’s hand. He squeezed hers back and smiled. Her single eye was near luminous with excitement, but it wasn’t on him. It was on the land ahead.

“How can this be? I never imagined it was going to be real,” Bjorn whispered.

“We might be the first people in a thousand years to see this, and the first since Ulf Skarsgard,” Elle said.

“It’s not a legend anymore,” Troy breathed. “This is what was foretold would be beyond Odin’s Gate. The hidden land of Lemuria; the Viking’s mysterious island.”

“Looks calm.” Bjorn straightened and lay the oar across his thighs. “Just how dangerous will it be?”

“That all depends on who’s home.” Troy gripped his paddle and began to stroke.

EPISODE 06

“What pen can describe this scene of marvelous horror; what pencil can portray it? — Jules Verne

CHAPTER 25

Lemuria, the Mysterious Island – today

The group sat in mute silence and just stared at what they now beheld. Impossibly, it was a thick rainforest under a frozen continent. And not just an ordinary forest, but huge, overgrown with massive pad-like fronds and trees that reached up into the sky.

But what sky? Troy craned forward to look out from under the lip of the cave at the sky, or what they all thought was the sky.

"It's all white," he frowned. "Is it cloud? I mean, the mist."

"No, there's mist here due to the suspended moisture in the air." Anne was leaning on her elbows far forward on the nose of the inflatable. "But up there it looks like it's refracting the light. It's got to be an ice ceiling, allowing a diffused light to enter without the bitter cold."

"Of course; that's how it remains hidden," Elle grinned. "It's like a giant greenhouse. Except one big enough to cover an entire rainforest. I mean, an entire island."

"How is it possible?" Elrik frowned. "How does it not get frozen and encased in solid ice in winter?"

"There are plenty of precedents of this," Anne replied. "There are deep lakes under the Antarctic ice that have been liquid for millions of years and contain life. Although so far, all that's been seen is smaller lifeforms like krill, algae, and bacteria living in them."

Troy turned. "I read a classified military report that was leaked to the Internet claiming that they found something a lot bigger living and thriving beneath the dark ice of the Antarctic."

Anne grinned. "I saw that too, Troy. They claimed it was the Kraken." She snorted. "Don't believe everything you read online."

Troy continued to stare straight ahead at the beach. "You mean like about Lemuria?"

She half smiled. "Okay, point taken. Anyway, in those buried lakes, the ice acted as an insulating blanket, and friction or geothermal activity stopped the water from freezing. I'm guessing the same thing has occurred here."

Elrik also leaned forward and looked to either side of them – they were inside a cave in a massive cliff, and it stretched away to the left and right of them until it disappeared into the mist. But before they could get to the land there was an expanse of water to cross.

"It's not a river," Troy said. "It's more like a moat."

Just beyond the water was a narrow beach, and then to the east of them, there was a good-sized waterway emptying into their small lake.

Anne pointed. "There's a river. Could be where your mosasaur came from and then got out into the Greenland waters." She looked down into the inky black water. "Or it came from right around here."

"Then let's hope it sticks to eating fish." Troy stood in the boat. "But I wonder just how big this place is if it can support creatures of that size." He turned to Anne. "You think it might be an ancient asteroid impact crater that iced over?"

"I do. Look at these cliff walls; just like a deep crater." Anne turned slowly, looking along the shoreline. "The biggest crater in the world is the Vredefort crater in South Africa." She turned, smiling. "That guy is just under 190 miles wide depending on where you measure from."

"190 miles? It could be that big?" Bjorn blew air between pressed lips. "Exactly how long are we planning on exploring here?"

"This is just a reconnoitre visit," Elrik reminded them. "We check out what we are up against, and maybe establish a base camp, then go back to the Arctic Princess to restock and come back later."

Astrid dipped her hand over the side. "The water is warm here. But the air temperature is cooler than I expected. I would have thought too cold for a jungle."

"It's a different sort of jungle – a temperate rainforest. This forest type is very ancient and prevalent in southeast Australia, the South Island of New Zealand, and southern South America, and thought to be the remnants of Gondwana." Anne clicked her fingers to Bjorn for his field glasses and then put them to her eyes. "Did you know that the remains of this forest type have been found in Antarctica?"

"I'd heard that Antarctica was once a rainforest," Troy replied. "Millions of years ago."

"Many, many millions of years ago, when Antarctica had dinosaurs." Anne scanned the jungle edge. "I can see massive tree trunks, vine growth, epiphytes, tree ferns and ground ferns, lichens and even what looks like some primitive orchids and colored fungi in there."

Anne lowered the glasses and looked up again. "When those forests were wiped out on the surface, the massive ice sheets kept this place insulated from the asteroid impact and its extinction event effects. It's why it's still here." She swung back to Bjorn. "We must go ashore."

"Not so fast. Given the sea creature we think came from here, it's not the pretty mushrooms and orchids I'm worried about," Elrik replied. "What sort of animal life might we encounter?"

Bjorn looked down at the water. "For all we know there's one of those things down there now."

Anne looked to Troy. "The skin."

"The what?" Elrik asked.

Elle sighed. "We, I mean Troy, recovered a sample of skin that

might have come from here. It was unidentifiable, but Anne ran some tests, and..."

Anne cut in, "And it might have been from a very ancient line of reptilians."

Elrik chuckled softly. "And how big?" He waited a second or two. "Guess."

Anne bobbed her head as she thought. "Large, the sample and the patterning of scutes, *ah*, lumps and bumps, indicated a creature that could potentially get to the size of a rhino."

Bjorn scoffed. "A rhino we can handle."

"Whatever lives in here, big or small, I suggest we keep our eyes open," Astrid commented. "Elrik, let's just land and see what we need to deal with."

Elrik turned back to the wall of rainforest that came nearly all the way to the water leaving a strip of sand only about a dozen feet wide. There was the thrum of insects, something that might have been bird call far off in the distance but didn't have the pleasant sing-song notes and was instead more a harsh screaming-hack, indicating a throat larger and coarser.

"Okay then. Nice and easy." Elrik began to slowly paddle toward the beach.

As they approached the sand line, Troy looked over the side. The water was becoming shallower and clearer, and a few sprats darted both left and right to get out of their way. Then came the ripple of a sandy bottom and a few grass-like sea plants.

The nose of the boats came in with the crush of sand grains and the group leapt out to pull them up onto the beach. Elrik looked along the tree line; there were a few paths, or potential animal tracks, but in some areas the forest was impenetrably thick.

He held his gun in his hands and slowly let his eyes move over the wall of green. After a while he turned away.

"Anyone have any suggestions of direction?" he asked.

Elle pointed. "There's a rocky outcrop at the south end of the beach. Let's try there first and then make our way a little more inland."

"Works for me," Troy replied. "Then we can use the eye again. See if it still wants to tell us if we're on track."

"Wait a minute. On track to what?" Elrik turned with brows knitted a little. "I thought you just wanted to prove this place existed."

Elle and Troy glanced at each other.

Elrik straightened. "What is really in this place that you're looking for?"

Troy and Elle remained silent.

Anne shrugged and reached into her pocket to pull out her phone. "I'm already in heaven. I just want to document everything I see. Then

write a paper when I get back. This is potentially the biggest story in paleontological history, ever.” She looked about. “I just hope we see some of the local fauna.”

“Well, Mr. Strom?” Elrik waited.

Troy looked to Elle and raised his eyebrows. She just rolled her eyes and he turned back to Elrik and sighed.

“Okay, the legend of Lemuria, about its existence, is only part of the tale. The other part of the legend is that this mysterious island hidden beyond Odin’s gate was where Vikings proved themselves worthy.” Troy half smiled and looked up. “It’s also where Odin hid his fierce red heart.”

“I’ve heard before of Viking trials, but not the part about Odin’s heart or even what it means. Go on.” Elrik’s eyes narrowed.

“I thought you said it was all just a fairy tale.” Elle lifted her chin.

Elrik waved a hand to the thick jungle behind him. “Obviously my opinion has been changed. Tell me all of it. Not knowing could be dangerous to us.” His voice held a warning.

Elle’s eye was like green flint as she retold the legend. Elrik, Bjorn, and Astrid were transfixed as they listened. She told them of the challenges and the trials, and also of Odin placing his still beating heart at its center to act as a beacon for the warriors to be drawn to.

“You said the warriors would be drawn to his heart – what is the heart?” Bjorn asked.

“What is the heart?” Elle’s eyes narrowed. “The heart is everything.”

Elrik frowned. “That means noth...”

“It’s supposed to be a ruby,” Troy added. “The size of a football, of perfect clarity, and of a pure and vibrant red.”

“I’ve never heard this part of the legend,” Bjorn said. “And it would be worth a lot of money?”

“It’s worth more than money.” Elle turned away.

“To put a value on it,” Troy smiled, “About one hundred million US dollars.”

Bjorn’s mouth dropped open.

“We came to prove Lemuria exists. And we did. But if Odin’s heart is real, then this would be a fitting reward for us.” Troy looked along each of their faces.

“Indeed, it would,” Elrik said and was about to turn away but paused. He slowly turned back to face Troy. “The eye – the *drekafinarri* – that’s what it is looking for.”

“It even says so.” Troy took out the eye and looked at the pupil. *I see the heart*, is inscribed there in the most ancient Viking runes known.”

Elrik pulled out his handgun and handed it to Troy. “Take this, partner.”

Troy put the eye back in his pocket and shook his head. He then took the Sig Sauer P228 from his back hip. "I'm okay." He tucked it into his front belt.

Elrik softly laughed. "A nice weapon for a businessman."

Elle grinned. "So..." She raised an eyebrow. "There is more to you than we know, *hmm?*"

She then held her hand out to her brother. "But I'll take that. I couldn't bring mine with me."

"Of course, my little sister will," Elrik laughed as he handed the gun over.

"So where's mine?" Anne tilted her head.

Elle stuck the gun in her belt. "Do you have firearms experience?"

"No, not at all. But I would at least like to have been asked," Anne replied.

"Just stay close to me," Bjorn said to Anne. "I'll protect you."

"My hero," Anne grinned.

They moved quickly along the sand, the sound of the grains scrunching beneath their boots almost drowned out by the scream and buzz of things still hidden behind the thick wall of forest.

Troy walked just behind Anne and Elle, and continually glanced in at the jungle. Strappy fronds created collars around the base of massive tree trunks that rose hundreds of feet in the air toward a crystal ceiling of unknown heights above them and clinging to their sides were ragged elephant-eared epiphytic plants.

A cool mist curled through narrow pathways and around boughs as big as houses. At one point, Troy thought he saw a shadow move just behind the line of trees, but after keeping his eyes on the spot for several seconds, it seemed to be nothing more than dappling light and moving mist... at least that's what he told himself.

Anne must have noticed him staring. "See something?"

"I don't know. Probably not." He glanced back at the spot again. "Guess I should be thankful for dragons being cold blooded, right?"

"Well, depends on what exactly it was that Vikings thought were dragons," Anne replied. "Because according to new information from the chemical analysis of dinosaur eggshells, it turns out that many were warm blooded. We now know that they existed at an evolutionary point between birds, which are warm-blooded, and reptiles, which are cold-blooded. So they probably had some sort of unique quasi-biology."

Troy didn't like the sound of that. "It's not that cold in here. But it's not warm either."

"Doesn't matter. In places that were cold or even freezing the land giants existed. Take the Arctic, Canada, Alaska, Antarctica, and right here in Greenland, dinosaurs thrived in cold temperatures. There's

even a name for them – polar dinosaurian. And they might have been covered in a primitive form of feathers for further insulation.”

“You’re not helping my nerves.” Troy smiled at her.

“Just stay close, I’ll protect you.” She then leaned closer to whisper. “More than anyone else in here.” Anne smiled as she glanced from Elle’s back. “Hey, quick question I’ve been wanting to ask you. Does your girlfriend have a glass eye?”

Troy looked from Elle to Anne as they walked. “Yes, she was born with only one eye.”

“Oh, poor thing.” Her mouth turned down. “Not so perfect after all then.”

“Give it a rest, Anne,” Troy sighed.

“What? I’m not trying to be mean.” She looked away, but then turned back with a grin. “Just makes you wonder what else is fake about her.”

In ten more minutes, they approached the outcrop of rock they had seen, and Elle sped up. She stopped before something half buried in the sand.

“Look here.” She walked slowly around the object.

The group sped to join her.

“It’s a longboat, or what’s left of it.” Troy laid a hand on the wood, and some crumbled beneath his touch. “Old.” He raised his eyebrows. “Maybe as old as the *Skidbladnr*.”

“The 1,000-year-old *Skidbladnr*?” Elrik asked.

Anne dug with the toe of her boot for a moment and then crouched to pull more sand away. She grunted from the effort of tugging at something, and Bjorn helped her drag it free.

She then held it up. “An axe head, and there’s more. Give me a hand here.”

She, Troy, and Bjorn pulled more sand away and dug into where the belly of the ship would have been. Inside the boat there were more artefacts: the remains of ancient iron helmets, the corroded bands of metal rings that once surrounded wooden shields and some shredded furs.

“No bodies,” Elrik observed. “Why would they leave this here?” He looked over the boat. “It’s damaged, but you give a Viking an axe and wood, and he could repair anything.” He looked around. “And there’s plenty of wood.”

“Maybe they didn’t abandon it,” Troy replied. “Maybe it was a last stand.”

The group was silent for a moment, and then turned to the wall of forest. It hung dark and mysterious before them.

“The Lemuria trial,” Elle sighed.

“To see if they were worthy.” Troy looked again at the shredded

furs. "They come here beyond Odin's Gate to the mysterious island of Lemuria to face the dragons and do battle. Then they were deemed worthy."

"And if not, they never leave," Elrik replied. He looked back at the boat half sunk in the sand. "I think there are a lot of Viking ghosts here."

Anne dug a little more and lifted a shard of something. She held it up. "More ghosts."

It was half of a skull. Discoloured by age but it looked strange. She turned it over in her hands. "Young, it has all its teeth. And male by the size." She rubbed the edge of the missing half. "Odd, the skull doesn't look broken, but it's smooth as if the bone was somehow melted."

"The ocean will do that," Bjorn said. "It can turn a wine bottle into glass pebbles given enough time."

Anne nodded but her brows drew together as she rubbed the edge of the skull with her thumb. "Yeah, maybe."

"Anyway, this happened a long, long time ago." Bjorn picked off a piece of the decaying wood and crumbled it in his hand. "Hopefully, anything that attacked them has been dead for a thousand years."

Astrid was looking along the forest line. She stopped to stare for a moment and then took a few steps. "Nope, I do not think that the potential threats have vanished with the years. *Look.*" She pointed.

At the edge of the forest, just where the sand met a line of darker soil, there were animal tracks. *Big* animal tracks.

She turned back to the group. "By the size of these prints we better make sure *our* ghosts don't join our Viking friends."

Anne went to the line of tracks and walked slowly around a few of the prints. She looked up, her mouth open in a grin. "These are theropod prints."

"Thero-what?" Bjorn frowned.

"Dinosaur," she replied.

CHAPTER 26

Troy watched as Anne went to her knees and held her hands above one of the impressions, measuring it in the air. "A theropod is a form of dinosaur..." She looked up briefly, her eyes gleaming. "They're characterized by three-toed limbs, bipedal, and generally classed as Saurischian Dinosaurs."

She sat back on her haunches and looked up at Bjorn. "They were predators, meat eaters and first appeared about 230-million years ago during the late Triassic period. And they were very successful as they became the dominant land carnivores up until about 66 million years ago." She stood and brushed her hands off.

"But it's so big," Bjorn said in an incredulous voice. "You said only as big as a rhino. This thing's print is huge."

"Big print from a big foot. And I never said rhino-sized was as big as they got." Anne nodded still looking down at the tracks. "An adult male rhino can get a couple of tonnes, easy. But a full grown *Spinosaurus aegyptiacus* or *Tyrannosaurus* got to be around 8 to 9-tonnes, so they were very big indeed. This one is nowhere near that, but I'd still love to take some casts."

"One thing I know is that they're supposed to be all long gone." Eirik stared down at the huge prints. "These prints were made just days or hours ago."

"Just like your sea serpent, they've found a place to keep on living." Troy looked up to follow the tracks back into the forest and then turned to look along the darker soil at the beach edge in the direction it was heading before it vanished into the forest line. "Our theory is that maybe these things are what the Vikings thought were dragons." He raised his eyebrows. "Perhaps where their entire dragon mythology came from. Remember what Anne said about this place being insulated from the outside world when the asteroid struck? Things in here survived." He pointed at the tracks. "And still survive."

Anne paced alongside the prints for a while. "This is fascinating; they're doing what a lot of riverside and coastal predators do." She turned back. "They come down to the water to see if anything edible has washed up. Or if it's a lake or river, watch for prey animals that come down to drink."

She stopped and squatted with her forearms on her thighs. "This one, maybe only a couple of tonnes, and probably twenty feet in length," Anne said as she looked down at the twelve-inch prints. "I can't tell what species, and whether or not it is just a juvenile or a full grown mid-sized animal." She looked up. "But I hope it's not one of the megatheropod species; they can get twice as long, twice as heavy

as a bull elephant, and would be very formidable.” She stood and continued to follow the tracks.

“We didn’t bring elephant guns,” Elrik replied. “I say we work hard to avoid meeting this guy or his mother face to face.”

“Gets my vote,” Astrid said with a flat smile.

“Oh, wow.” Anne bent and picked up something that looked like a hairy branch. She examined it for a few moments before turning and holding it up. “Guess what this is?”

“A feather duster?” Elle asked.

Anne looked at it for a moment. “It’d certainly work as one.” She smiled broadly. “Hey, does anyone remember that dinosaur movie where at the end the kid says something like: *I think I understand now; the dinosaurs never disappeared. Instead, they turned into birds and flew away.*”

“Jurassic Park,” Troy replied.

“That’s it.” Anne nodded. “Well, the debate has raged for years, decades, about whether dinosaurs had feathers or not. It was hard to tell as things like hair and feathers don’t fossilise well. But then, ten well preserved fossil feathers found in Antarctica were solid evidence that feathered dinosaurs lived at Earth’s poles and dated back 118 million years. So, you know what...?” She twirled the huge thing in her fingers, “...I think this is a dinosaur feather.”

Troy came and took it from her and examined the thing. It was about 3-feet long, thick as a pencil and instead of the soft broad shape of a normal feather, it was like hair bristles, and coloured in green and brown bands.

“Troy, you wondered how the dinosaurs could survive in the cold, well the environment here is much warmer than Antarctica is and the dinosaurs that sported plumage probably endured potentially freezing temperatures during winter.” She smiled. “Not all dinosaurs lived in humid swamps or baking deserts like in the movies.”

“That’s not what I was thinking about right now.” Troy moved the huge feather in his fingers, and it shimmered slightly. He held it up against the forest wall.

“What then?” Anne asked.

“Camouflage,” he said, slowly twirling the huge feather. “In amongst foliage, something covered in these would blend in and be near invisible.”

Elrik and Bjorn turned to look out into the jungle.

“Oh.” Anne stared for a moment more. “You’re right.”

“My God.” Elrik shook his head. “We have huge reptile creatures that are probably waiting to ambush us, and we won’t even see them coming. And all we’ve got is a few rifles and handguns.”

“We’ll be okay,” Elle assured her brother. “We just stay together,

stay quiet and stay alert.”

“We should probably not hang around too long in the same place. Especially if these things are coming down to the water to hunt,” Astrid said.

“Good idea,” Elrik said softly. “Mr. Strom, which way?”

Troy looked along the beach, his brows knitted.

“Use the eye,” Elle suggested.

Troy removed the green orb from his pocket and placed it on the flat of his palm. After a second or two it began to swivel. The eye looked first to the forest, and then slowly turned to point down along the beach’s sand line. He lifted his head; in the distance there was a stand of extremely tall, but dead and limbless looking trees at the water line before the island curved around out of sight.

“We head down to those dead trees and take another sight check,” he said.

“Lead us on, Mr. Strom.” Elrik motioned with his head.

Troy turned back to the beach and headed off. Elle joined him and walked at his side. Just behind them was Anne and Astrid, followed by Elle’s brothers.

They were only a dozen feet from the placid, dark water, and in the cool air small vapor ghosts lifted from the warmer liquid.

Troy was lost in his own thoughts as he walked, wondering how long they would spend on the island. His eyes moved from the sandy beach that had crushed shells, tiny bones, and pieces of driftwood. And he observed no pollution – there were no old fishing buoys, bottle caps, or even decaying plastic bags. *That’s something*, he thought.

He wondered whether the ice melt that opened the door also meant the water level rose in this hidden place as the ice released more water. He turned to look at the calm, dark water – he also wondered how deep it was – a few feet, a dozen, or a hundred.

While he watched, there began a V-shaped wave further out for a few seconds, but then vanished. He continued to watch the water’s surface and then sure enough the V-wave started again, closer in, and this time ran parallel to the beach and kept pace with them.

It snapped Troy from his reverie.

“Hey, heads up; we’ve got something tracking us.” He drew his gun and carried it beside his leg.

“Where?” Bjorn turned to the jungle and lifted the rifle.

“Other way; the water,” Elle said.

“Back up,” Troy said and led them higher on the beach.

But he wasn’t happy about that either as it meant they were drawing back to the dark forest, and with their backs turned to it.

Troy glanced over his shoulder and saw that just a few feet into the tree line they were as blind to anything in there as they were to what

was beneath the dark water.

He turned to the water again and saw the V-wave had now turned directly toward the shore and was coming right at them.

"Here we go," he said and lifted his gun to hold it in both hands.

Whatever it was it accelerated – fifty feet, thirty, twenty, ten, and then when the water was shallower, they saw the huge dark curved head of the creature as it glided in to get a look at them.

"It's a black alligator." Bjorn aimed his rifle.

"Don't shoot, don't shoot," Anne yelled.

The thing was big, and its head was shovel-shaped and three feet long, probably a third of the body length. And on each side of the head were tiny unblinking eyes. The mouth opened and closed with the needle-sharp teeth creating a bear trap look to its mouth.

"It's not like that thing you captured. Not a sea reptile, but an amphibian." Anne looked around. "The water here must be more fresh water from the ice melt, and this guy came out of one of the rivers."

"What is it?" Elrik asked. "Those teeth and legs tell me it can come ashore if it wants."

"It might take a run at me if I got close," she said, "but it would mostly feed on fish and crustaceans. I think it's a giant amphibian, possibly a *Cyclotosaurus naraserluki*. They lived in this area during the late Triassic, between 228 and 200 million years ago." Anne carefully eased out her camera and took a few cautious steps closer.

"What are you doing?" Elrik lifted his rifle to his shoulder.

"Just give me a second." Anne lifted her camera. "I think the water is too dark, but..." she took a shot, and the gloom caused the camera to use its flash.

The blast of light made the thing react and with a flick of its oar-like tail created a wave that drenched Anne. And then it was gone.

Anne spluttered and shook water from her face. "And it has weak vision and is usually a night hunter." She sighed and checked her picture. "Argh, I'm a crap photographer."

"Don't worry, I'm sure you two will meet again," Elle said.

Elrik herded them away from the water and further down the beach. Once again, the group walked in silence, and Troy tried to keep his attention split between the forest line and the sand ahead. A splash in the water beside them drew his head quickly around – there was nothing this time but a swirl on the dark surface.

He spoke over his shoulder as he walked. "Elrik, keep an eye on the water."

"Damn right I will," the man replied.

"Bjorn, you get the forest," Troy said.

"On it." Bjorn carried his gun cradled on his arms as he walked beside Anne who continued to work at trying to improve the picture

she had taken.

They trudged along for another ten minutes, focusing on the stand of towering and curved trees coming closer. Troy narrowed his eyes as he tried to identify them. It didn't worry him that he couldn't, and they might have been some species that didn't exist on the outside world, or perhaps hadn't for millions of years. But he bet Anne would have a better idea.

But then they got closer. And he thought maybe not.

"Good lord," Elle breathed.

The group stood at the top of a mound of low rocks buried in the sand and gazed at the tall objects.

"So much for the trees." Troy turned. "Anne, what do you think?"

Anne joined them and then she walked a few steps closer. She turned and slowly shook her head.

"This... this is unbelievable." Her mouth hung open and she pointed. "They're not trees."

"Damn right they're not." Troy looked up at the things.

What they thought were tree trunks were ribs, a line of them, still attached to a backbone that was sunk somewhere below the sand. They rose a hundred feet into the air and gently curved to the centre. Several hundred feet further on lay a partly buried object that might have been a colossal skull.

"What is it?" Elle breathed.

"What is it?" Elrik looked up at the colossal bones. "A monster from your lost island."

CHAPTER 27

The group stared up at the massive bones that towered above them. No one spoke. Anne walked around the base of one of the trunk-thick ribs.

"Some type of mega-saurid." She continued to stare up at the ribs. "But even the largest Dreadnaughtus or titanosaur, or even the massive Argentinosaurus at 118 feet long are dwarfed by this thing." She laid a hand on one of them and spoke as if spellbound. "This thing defies everything we know about prehistoric creatures. But..."

"But not evolution," Astrid added. "You place animals in a controlled environment and keep the conditions the same, give them plenty of food, and room, and their response is to grow big."

Anne nodded. "That's right." She turned back. "Whatever this thing was, its species had become a true colossus now – *Colossusaurus AnneWalshi*." She turned and grinned. "Naming rights and all."

"Let's hope we get home to celebrate it," Elle added.

"What must it have looked like with meat on its bones?" Elrik asked.

"We would just be ants to these things," Bjorn said. "I hope it only eats vegetables."

"Most likely," Anne said and took several pictures. "But this thing would be so cumbersome, that just getting in its way would mean you could get crushed." Her brows drew together. "You know, this creature might not be without precedent."

"What do you mean?" Astrid asked.

"I was involved in a paleontological investigation a few years back. We found the remains of a titanic creature on a dig in Sweden's Kristianstad Basin, but we could never identify it." She slid her hand up one of the massive rib bones. "There were also rumours of a mega-find in China. But it was never confirmed."

"Big as this?" Troy asked.

"Monstrous, but not quite this big. Weirdest thing was most of the biggest dinosaurs to ever exist were plant eaters. But at the dig site of the creature we found there were the large backward curving teeth of a carnivore. We assumed they got mixed in somehow; two different species. But what if they weren't?" She looked towards the front of the creature. "I'd love to dig up the skull and see if it's the same."

"Not today," Elrik said.

"Must be a plant eater," Astrid said.

Anne just smiled and shrugged. "Won't know until we see a live one."

"There could be a live one? No, that's it, we cannot go on." Bjorn

turned to his elder brother. "We are not ready for this."

Elrik looked again at the mighty rib bones rising into the air. "Big prey animals usually mean big predator animals, yes?" He faced Anne.

She nodded. "Evolution usually matches its hunters to the hunted."

Elrik exhaled. "Then he's right. We never expected the threats to be this, *ah*, large. We need to return home..."

"To the boat?" Troy asked.

Elrik shook his head. "No, to the port. We restock, get more firearms and more firepower. Plus, ammunition and supplies. Maybe even more people."

"No, that'll take weeks," Troy shot back. "By the time we return, if we even *can* return, the entrance is liable to have iced back over."

"I did not come here, or bring my sister here, to watch her or anyone else die." Bjorn's gaze was dead level.

Elle held her hands up. "Do not retreat on my behalf. If we do not make the discoveries, others will. And I do not think they were far behind us."

Troy looked at Elle, wondering if there was something she knew or was just supporting him. It didn't matter. He turned back to the brothers. "Everything we do, every day has risk. You could get killed crossing the road back home," Troy urged. "We manage it, avoid threats, and limit our time here. We can do this."

"No, you saw those thero-whatever tracks. Anne said it was a large meat-eater, and maybe not even fully grown. And maybe these threats in this place just won't let us avoid them, no matter how careful we are or how smart you think you are. Sorry, Mr. Strom, but my mind is made up. We're leaving." Elrik began to turn to speak to his brother.

"Bullshit, you don't speak for everyone. Who put you in charge?" Troy demanded.

"The boat," Elrik said and turned back to him. "As the captain, I am responsible, even for your well-being."

"We're not on your fucking boat now." Troy felt his anger beginning to overtake his thinking.

"You want to swim home?" Elrik's voice was low.

Troy turned to Elle. "I knew it was a mistake allowing these guys to come."

"Enough," Elle said. She walked between the two men and put her hands on her hips. "You're both right," she said.

Elle turned to give Troy a *play-along-with-me* look. She then faced her brothers.

"I agree we need more firepower and people. I also agree with Troy that if we don't take this opportunity now, we might never see it again."

"Great, so how do we do both?" Bjorn asked.

Elle folded her arms. "We have more firepower and more men." Her expression was tight. "We return to the boat and get Jorgan. He has the large rifle and is a good shot. We also get all the ammunition and anything else we might need."

"One extra man with a rifle," Elrik snorted. He pointed up at the towering rib cage behind him. "Against that."

"You'd need a grenade launcher against that." Elle's laugh was a bark. "And even back home you're not going to find one of those." She looked up at the bones. "For those guys, we stay low and out from under their feet. We're just mice to them." She shrugged. "Besides, something that big can't be hard to spot well in advance. If they even still exist."

"So, we just drop anchor and leave the boat?" Bjorn raised an eyebrow.

"If the weather looks good for a few days, then yes, it'll be fine," Elle replied.

Elrik sighed. "It had better be, because if anything happens to the Princess, the inflatables aren't going to make it home." He cast a hand around. "We'll end up living here."

"The sooner we start, the sooner we can begin our exploration." She shrugged. "And then get home." Elle tilted her head back on her neck. "So, who volunteers to go back for Jorgan?"

"I'll do it," Troy said. "I'll take one of the boats. Be back in an hour."

Elrik guffawed. "If you, a stranger, tried to convince Jorgan to leave the boat, he's likely to throw you overboard."

"Then I'll go too," Elle said and turned to Elrik. "You guys be okay here for a few hours? Anne?"

Anne nodded but looked unsure.

Elrik's lips pressed together in a thin line for a moment before he finally nodded. "Don't get lost, little sister."

After paddling back through the river cave, they finally came to the rift in the ice wall and Troy decided to chance using the motor to speed their trip. He kept it to about 3 knots, and with Elle at the front spotting for him they managed to make good time.

He knew he only had to travel less than half a mile and hopefully see the lights of the Arctic Princess that Jorgan had been instructed to keep blazing.

After a few bumps from smaller bergs, sure enough, it didn't take long for them to see the boat's glow through the mist.

"That's odd." Troy lifted himself in his seat. "Did the Arctic Princess have more inflatables?"

Elle craned forward. "Maybe, but I don't think so."

There was another boat tied up to the side of the ship. An inflatable, sure, but larger and older looking. More like something that had been exposed to the elements for years and would be suspect for being close to unseaworthy.

"Maybe Jorgan found it floating out here," Elle suggested.

"*Hmm.*" Troy slowed them when they were just a hundred feet out. "*Ahoy, Jorgan.*"

There was no answer.

"He should be there. The guy is as reliable as a rock," Elle offered.

Troy manoeuvred them to the side of the Princess where the ladder touched the water, and cut the engine, gliding the rest of the way. He shot out a hand and grabbed hold of the ladder and tied them off.

Troy rapped on the steel of the hull with his fist, and the sound reverberated into the heart of the ship. "*Ahoy, Jorgan,*" he yelled again.

The pair waited for a full minute, but there was still no response.

"Stay here," he said.

"Like hell," Elle replied and grabbed the ladder and began to scale first.

"Goddammit, wait, *wait.*" Troy scrambled to keep up.

On deck they still couldn't see much with the heavy mist hanging over them like a London fog.

"*Jorgan!*" she yelled.

They waited a few moments, but eerie silence was all that returned.

"I don't like it," Troy said softly.

"Something's very wrong." Elle turned to him, and he saw her eye was alert but also slightly fearful.

They headed for the wheelhouse. Troy pulled his gun. Elle, seeing him, did the same.

They climbed the small set of stairs to the wheelhouse and Troy glanced inside through the window. It was empty. There was a mug of something on the control panel top, and the instruments still had lights, so the power was on.

He turned to Elle, counted down from three, and then drew the door back. He entered fast followed by Elle. They immediately fanned out checking the small space.

"I don't get it; where could he go?" she asked.

Troy quickly checked the controls and found the ship all seemed in order. He shook his head. "We're going to have to perform a top to bottom search. Maybe he hurt himself below deck."

"We split up?" she asked.

"No, we can do it together, the ship's not that big. Like I said, maybe he's had an accident somewhere." Troy knew that didn't account for the other inflatable being tied up to them.

“Then let’s get going. We start in the mess,” Elle said and slid back the door to the inner gangway.

Even Troy felt a shock run through him as the big man filled the doorway. One of his huge hands shot out to grab Elle’s gun and rip it from her. Then, in a blink the other hand had a knife that went to her throat. He spun her around, holding her in front of himself, and then muscled into the room.

Then came more men, all big. One of the largest had runic tattoos on his neck and a grim smile plastered on his bearded face. Troy had seen that look in men and women’s eyes before – cold, cruel, and having zero respect for human life. The guy was a killer and his size meant he wasn’t to be underestimated.

“Mr. Strom and Ms. Elleanor Kristiansen or Burgan now, I think.” His face was grim. “Hand over your gun, Mr. Strom.” Troy hesitated. “It would be unpleasant if my man here has to cut the woman,” the giant said.

Troy calculated the odds of taking all four men out. If he was by himself, he’d chance it; he was certainly trained to fight multiple adversaries and in enclosed spaces. But could he take them all down without Elle being hurt? Unlikely.

“I’ll holster it,” he said.

The big guy nodded to his colleague who began to dig into the flesh of Elle’s neck. Blood flowed. She gritted her teeth but made no sound.

“Stop.” He let the gun hang on his finger and held it out. The big guy ripped it from his hand, almost breaking Troy’s finger and then stuck it in his belt. He nodded again, and Elle was pushed toward Troy, her gun also having been taken.

“You are the people who have been tracking us,” Elle spat, while holding her throat.

The big guy shrugged. “Of course. We are keepers of the flame.” His expression darkened. “And who are you, other than looters, treasure hunters, and thieves?”

“You know who we are,” Troy replied flatly. “And we are just seekers of knowledge. Who are you?”

Elle still had her teeth grit. “Where’s Jorgan?”

The big man waved her question away, and Troy was surprised at how confident Elle was in front of these four huge men.

“My name is Vissen Tygo.” He turned and grinned. “And I am chieftain of this clan.”

“Chieftain, *huh?*” Troy’s eyes narrowed. “It was you that killed old Blair?”

“The old shop keeper? Yes, it was,” Tygo said without hesitation.

“And you attacked me,” Elle bared her teeth, her eyes furious.

“I ordered that too.” Tygo’s smile was flat. “Your piece of the urn

delivered me enough information to lead me here. But that was all. I needed you to show me the rest of the path to Lemuria." He held his arms wide. "And here we are."

Elle lowered her hand from her throat, her fist balled. "*I asked where's Jorgan?*"

Tygo's eyes slid to her. "He fought. Bravely." He smiled with mock sadness. "But he lost. And then I threw his body over the side."

"Oh no, Jorgan." Elle's expression changed from misery to fury in a blink and her words hissed from between her bared teeth. "I'll fucking kill you."

"Jorgan said the same thing. And now where is Jorgan?" Tygo's smile remained. "But now it is time to finish our mission. You will lead us back through Odin's Gate."

"I'd rather die," Elle said.

"Okay." Tygo pulled the gun and pointed it at her forehead. "I only need one of you."

Elle never blinked but Troy saw the pressure of his finger on the trigger and the resolve in the man's expression. He knew he'd do it.

"*Stop!*" Troy shouted.

Tygo waited. Behind him his men stood in silence. Not grinning, mindless goons, but well disciplined. All of them were focused and committed. Troy knew he and Elle were outgunned and out muscled.

"We'll show you," he said.

"No!" Elle demanded.

"Live for something. Don't die for nothing," Troy replied.

Elle turned away.

"Let's go. We know the way and can guide you," Troy said.

"Yes, you know the way." Tygo just stood there staring back with a deadpan expression. "Tell me, Troyson Strom, how are *you* here?"

"I was led here by the urn, just like you," he replied evenly.

"I have seen the urn as well. And there is a piece missing. The piece that completes the *Skidbladnr* journey. So, how did you get here, how did you find your way through the mist? What clues did you follow that we did not?" Tygo looked deep into his eyes.

There was no way Troy was about to tell him about the jade *drekafinnari* eye. Because once Tygo had it, then they wouldn't be needed, and they'd quickly join Jorgan.

Tygo's eyes narrowed. "What are you hiding, Mr. Strom? Do you have something? Did you or Ms. Burgan find something I missed? A map maybe?" He stepped forward.

"No." Troy backed up a step and into Elle. He had surreptitiously reached into his pocket for the eye. He knew they were going to search him, and he needed to hide it somewhere.

He suddenly felt Elle's hand on his, and he pressed the jade orb into

it. He then stepped forward and placed his hands on his hips.

"We just used good ole brain power. You should try it some time," he said.

Tygo stared for a moment. "Search him."

The man next to him stepped forward and Elle looked about to intervene but was pushed backwards. Her head was jarred back, and she put a hand over her jaw.

They patted Troy down, checking his pockets as they went.

"And her." Tygo's eyes were half lidded with impatience.

Troy was alarmed but Elle didn't flinch. They did the same to her and she remained stern-faced and never made a sound.

Troy had to stop it. "One day I'm going to kill you for what you did to Jorgan," he said evenly.

Tygo snorted softly. "But not this day, yes?" He was half a head taller than Troy and the Viking craned down at him. "Many have tried. And they are all dead. The moment you stop being useful, then you will be dead too." He pointed a finger in Troy's face. "Be useful." His eyes narrowed. "Will you be useful?"

Elle must have felt the tension rising. "We found it; Lemuria," she said in a rush.

Tygo turned away from Troy. "You found it, the actual island?"

"Yes. The mysterious island from legend. Beyond Odin's Gate is an entire hidden world. But it is dangerous, so we came back to retrieve more weapons," she said. "And Jorgan."

"It is real. I knew it." Tygo shut his eyes and inhaled, filling his huge chest. "Praise Odin." His eyes opened to slits. "And the heart of Odin?"

"No, we haven't explored the island yet," Elle said.

Tygo grunted. "Good. And you do not need more weapons. You have us now."

"Then we're done here," Troy replied.

Tygo stared back for a moment, perhaps looking for some sort of subterfuge or ruse but Troy's flat gaze gave nothing away.

The big man turned. "We take both boats. Ms Elle will come with me and Lars. Sven and Ord can take Mr Strom." He clicked his fingers. "We go."

"Wait, I need to take my eye out," Elle said.

"What did she say?" Lars asked with brow creased. "You need to what?"

Elle put her hand to her face, and then took out her glass eye just leaving a red socket. "People with glass eyes need to remove them to rest the socket or it can get infected." She held up the removed eye and then put it in her pocket. She took out her patch and covered the empty socket.

Tygo smiled. "I think you have always seen more with one eye than many see with two, Ms. Burgan." He gave a small bow. "And your looks remain undiminished."

"Don't flirt with me. I still want you dead for what you did to Jorgan," Elle spat.

"Then you must get in line," Tygo laughed loudly and then clapped his large hands once. "*Now* we are done." He held out one log-like arm. "Take us to Lemuria."

CHAPTER 28

Troy was forced in front as they headed out on deck, and Elle bumped up against him. He looked at her and mouthed, *Where is it?*

Elle quickly glanced at the three men who were preoccupied and so reached up to lift her eyepatch. In her socket was now the orb of the green dragon finder.

She leaned in closer. "Feels weird. I can feel it moving."

"You're mad." Troy grinned and shook his head. "And amazing."

Tygo split them up and Elle climbed into the lead boat out front. "I'll guide you," she said.

Lars snorted as he looked out at the impenetrable mist. "How?"

She scoffed. "Don't you know that women have a better sense of direction than men?" She turned back to the water and the heavy mist. "And I remember the way."

"Be my guest," he guffawed.

They set off and the mist closed in around them and swirled in their wake as they passed through it. There was vision for just a dozen feet, and even between the crew in the lead boat their forms were indistinct.

From time-to-time Elle held up a hand, guiding them around submerged blocks of ice the size of cars, but only showed at the surface as flatter areas on the water.

They moved in ever closer to the coast and in another ten minutes the water warmed, and the bergs vanished. Then, looming before them was the mighty wall of ice, and in moments more they found the massive crack in its edifice, and headed in.

They passed through the towering walls of ice and Elle slowed them again as they moved within the cave.

Ord sniffed. "Smells like something burning in here."

Troy looked over his shoulder at the man. "We had a little vermin problem on the way in."

They continued pushing forward through the dark water and in a few more minutes Tygo stopped the boat for a moment. He allowed Troy, Sven, and Ord in the other boat to catch them. He spoke softly but the level of threat was there.

"We know who is with you, and how many." His voice was low and menacing. "I don't need to tell you two that if you try and alert them, there will be shooting and death." He looked from Troy to Elle. "You two will be the first to go."

Troy looked at the man, and his other brutes, Lars, Ord, and Sven; their flat gaze meant they were ready to carry out Tygo's orders without hesitation. Still, he couldn't let them push him without trying

a pushback. "Forget it. If you think I'm going to introduce you as long-lost friends, you can go to hell."

Tygo snorted. "I don't care how you introduce us. But the first thing you will do is disarm them. And they get to live. Am I understood?"

Troy glanced at Elle, who just perceptibly shook her head. Unfortunately, there was no choice; if he gave Elrik and Bjorn the option, they would try and shoot it out. And that would be a certainty if they learned about Jorgan.

There'd be a time to fight later. But it wasn't now with the odds so heavily against them.

He nodded once.

"Smart choice." Tygo restarted the boat, and they headed in, and directly across the stretch of water to the beach.

Troy and Elle immediately caught sight of their team, who stared back, obviously perplexed by the second boat and the number of people.

Tygo and Troy's boat was in the lead, and he revved it to accelerate up onto the sand. The other boat followed and did the same. With both boats now grounded, Tygo turned to Troy, his gun hidden just below the raft's gunwale and pointed at the team.

"You stay put," he said to Elle. "Go and save their lives, Mr. Strom," he then said calmly.

Troy leapt out. "Give me five minutes," he said over his shoulder.

"You have two," Tygo replied flatly.

Troy walked forward and Elrik and Bjorn cradled their rifles and waited for him. Astrid and Anne stood just behind them.

"Who are they?" Elrik said, his eyes on the newcomers and not Troy.

"They think they're descendants of the true Vikings and have been tracking us for weeks," Troy replied. "They're heavily armed and will kill us if need be."

Here goes, Troy thought. "You'll need to surrender your weapons."

"What?" Bjorn scowled. "The hell we will."

"Now is not the time," Troy urged. "They'll kill Elle first. And I believe them. I know they've already killed before."

Elrik dropped his head. And cursed. He then lowered his rifle.

"What? *No!*" Bjorn exclaimed. "We can take them."

"Bjorn," Elrik sighed. "If it was just us, I would fight to the death. But look to your sister, and then Astrid and Anne. Do you want them to get hurt?"

The second brother looked from Elrik to the second boat, and anger and frustration twisted his features. After another moment he closed his eyes.

"Now is not the time," Troy said.

“Now is not the time,” Bjorn nodded.

“But when that time comes, and it will, we’ll be ready,” Troy added. Elrik grunted and held out his rifle. After another moment Bjorn did the same. Troy took them.

“Does Jorgan know about this?” Bjorn asked.

Troy turned to fling the guns toward Tygo, and on seeing this Tygo and his team dragged the boats a little further up onto the sand next to the Arctic Princess’ other inflatable.

Troy turned back, knowing this was going to hurt bad. “Jorgan is dead.”

Elrik’s eyes bulged with anger. Bjorn yelled and took a swing at Troy, but he easily ducked under it and pushed the man in the back and he went down onto all fours.

“Save it,” Troy hissed through clamped teeth. “We will have our revenge.”

Bjorn stayed on the ground, pounding a fist into the sand, and Elrik went and lay a hand on his younger brother’s shoulder.

“We will have our time. Be strong, little brother,” he whispered.

“I apologise for this.” Tygo had his men retrieve their guns. “But until we know each other better, it is a good thing that no accidents happen. My men are well trained in war. And you are just fishermen.” He glanced at Troy. “And you are a failed businessman,” he snorted derisively.

Troy wasn’t insulted in the least and in fact was relieved that they thought this. It meant Tygo had done some cursory background checking on them and hadn’t been able to penetrate the CIA’s firewalls to get at his files. He wondered if this rogue group did find out who he was and what he had been trained in, whether they would have regarded him too high risk to keep and shot him on the spot.

Lars looked at the brothers. “Oh, they just heard of their friend.” He shrugged. “Better him than them I think.”

Troy watched Tygo and his team and wondered why they didn’t just kill them all now. Tygo had been led to his destination. He had the guns, and the boats. Maybe he just intended to strand them here, which would be the same as killing them. Whatever he had planned for them, he had a feeling he’d soon find out.

Perhaps because the one thing he didn’t have was the eye, he still hoped that they could be guides.

But that illusion was soon dispelled.

Tygo turned. “Lars, bring it to me.”

The large man with the braided beard recovered something rolled up from their boat and carried it carefully in two hands to his leader. He held it out and actually bowed his head.

Tygo unrolled it and they saw it was a set of large photographs.

“From the tomb of Hagarr the Great.”

Tygo discarded most of them, letting them fall to the sand, and only kept the last. He held it up.

“And now we have a map.”

While Tygo organised the group, Troy moved closer to Elle. He could tell she still seethed at him for giving up their weapons.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he whispered.

“I doubt that.” She turned away.

“Now was not the time,” he warned her. “Being dead is not a way to extract revenge.”

She exhaled hard and paced away from him. He followed.

“For now, we need to do what they say. When an opportunity presents itself, we can break away from them.”

She turned back. “And do what? They’ve got a map. They’ve got the guns, and now our boats.”

“No.” He reached out for her. “We’ve got a guide as well, the eye, and probably more accurate than a 1,200-year-old map.”

“I’ve got the eye.” She turned back, the gaze from her single green eye next to the patch dead level at him. “So why do they still need us?”

“They don’t,” he replied. “That’s what worries me.”

Tygo walked along the beach a few dozen feet and glanced down at his map. He seemed to check off landmarks, and then came back to the front of the group and turned his back on the forest.

“We need to move along the beach for another half mile, then we will come to a rocky outcrop. We head into the jungle there. Mr Strom will be in the lead.”

“In that case, I’ll need my gun,” he replied.

“I think not. But you can keep your knife to use as a machete. And you’ll make a fine decoy,” Tygo chuckled. “But to improve your odds, I will let the brothers join you at the front.”

He clicked his fingers. “Lars and Ord, next. Then the three women. Sven and I will guard our rear.” He turned about.

“We should protect the boats. It’s a little cold to swim back if anything happens to them,” Elrik said.

Tygo bobbed his head for a moment. “Good idea.” He turned. “Sven, you will stay here.”

The big man nodded without question.

Tygo then narrowed his eyes as he looked down along the narrow strip of sand. Satisfied, he clicked his fingers. “Proceed, Mr. Strom.”

Troy looked back to the forest. In the darker soil there were faint animal tracks, lots of them, where something had been coming back and forth to the beach. Perhaps it was their huge three-toed theropod

Anne had mentioned.

He exhaled softly as he scanned the dense forest. Further in there were massive tree trunks with bark that looked like scales or shingles. Some even had a covering that looked a little like wiry fur and no branches instead just culminating at their top with a strappy looking head like a thin palm tree.

Amongst the boughs of some of the bigger trees, broad palm fronds spread wide, and hanging vines, some with bulbous things growing there that might have been fruit or seed pods hanging from them. They strangled anything they could cling to.

Everywhere, massive leaves spread wide, perhaps in an effort to catch the rays of weak light that filtered down from above.

Troy could feel the cool dampness on his face, and the mist curled and wafted across the animal track pathways. Further in he saw there were a hundred places to conceal a Mac truck let alone some sort of camouflaged ambush predator. And he bet they were in there, and here he was unarmed.

“What could possibly go wrong?” he muttered. He reached up to one of the tree trunks close by and used his knife to mark it. He’d try and remember to do this every hundred paces.

“Get moving,” Tygo urged.

Troy turned back and saw Astrid, Anne, and Elle both wide-eyed and staring back at him. He nodded reassuringly. He then turned to Elrik and Bjorn. Both had set jaws and looked more pissed off than scared.

“Ready?” he asked them.

“Ready to kill those bastards,” Elrik whispered. “And then you.”

“Save it. Stay alive first. That’s our priority,” Troy replied, and then turned back.

He felt for the knife on his belt. It was an eight-inch razor sharp hunting knife. It wasn’t much, but it was better than nothing.

He breathed in deeply through his nose, smelling wood, leaf litter, and muddy water. He started in past the first line of the forest.

After only five minutes from the beach the abundant plant life closed in on them, and with it went a lot of the light. Things scurried out of his way as he barged and hacked. Most were small, but some were dog-sized, and though they moved too fast for him to get a good look at, he had an impression of stripes on some, and on others he glimpsed an iridescent shimmering that might have been scales. Or perhaps as Anne suggested, they could have been flattened down feathers.

Troy sniffed, catching the scent of something odd. He raised a hand. The group stopped behind him.

He turned. “Anne, Astrid.” He waved them forward.

Anne came closer with Lars at her shoulder. The big man raised a hand to halt the rest of the group.

"Smell that?" Troy asked.

Anne sniffed and then nodded. "Yes, shit." She walked forward several paces in a crouch, and then stopped and pulled a large frond out of the way.

She turned back to him and motioned him closer. "Here."

He joined her. In a small clearing of crushed plants, there was a line of brown, speckled packages the size of footballs.

She smiled open mouthed. "Wow, I've only ever seen it as coprolite. But I'm pretty sure that's dino-dung," she said.

"It's huge," Troy whispered.

"Yep, big poop, big ass, big ass owner." Anne nodded and turned back.

Astrid crouched. "And something else; the shape tells me it's probably a large carnivore that dropped that. And by the smell, not long ago."

"How big?" Troy asked.

"I've seen the poop of an 18-foot saltwater crocodile." Astrid turned to him. "It was less than half that size."

"What's the hold up?" Lars asked, keeping his eye on Bjorn and Eirik who cast murderous glares at him.

Troy stepped back and motioned forward. "That's dinosaur shit; a big one."

Lars looked around briefly, and just shrugged. "Well don't step in it. Get moving, little man." He cradled his gun as he eased back several steps leaving Troy room to move out front. "Don't worry, I'll cover you," he said.

"Yeah, sure you will." Troy shook his head. He sighed and then turned to Anne and Astrid who were both crouching near the droppings.

"Okay, you guys better get back behind Bluto here. One neck stuck out is enough," he said and waited, but Anne remained crouching.

"This is weird." She pointed to the large pad-like print. "It's sort of like a reptilian print, but the pads are different. Almost displaying some mammalian features."

"I don't know what that means," Troy replied.

"Neither do I. Yet." Anne stood.

"Well, if those tracks tell us it's not a dinosaur, then that's a good thing," he said.

"I don't know." She flat smiled. "It might be something worse."

"Something worse?" Troy scoffed. "Oh yeah, that's great, and thank you. I'll be the dumb schmuck out front if you need me."

She chuckled. "No, sorry, I mean something different. Something,

ah, far older than I thought. For all we know there are creatures here that do not appear in the fossil record from outside – they might have been cut off for tens or hundreds of millions of years.”

Troy sighed. “Well, there’s nothing like being in a primordial jungle with giant beasts and armed with only a hunting knife.”

“Tarzan did it,” Elle said from behind him.

“And he had the apes on his side.” He nodded at Lars. “They’re not on my side here.”

“Get moving!” Tygo yelled from the rear.

“His master’s voice,” Troy thumbed back. “Go on Astrid, Anne. I’ll be fine.”

He waited until they joined Elle behind Lars and Ord and then started off again. Troy held his ground for several moments and then looked up at the large form of Lars.

Time to take a gamble, he thought.

“I’m not moving until you give me something to defend myself with,” he said. “I’m hardly going to run off, or make war on you while you’re covering the others, am I?”

“No. Move it,” Lars replied.

Troy folded his arms.

“Listen, if anything happens to me, you guys will be next. Having a gun at least allows me to slow something down that takes a run at us.”

Ord pushed past Lars as he came forward, fast, and turned his rifle around to jam it into Troy’s gut. The air was expelled from his diaphragm in a rush, and he doubled over. It damned hurt.

“There’s your answer,” Ord growled.

“Yep, message received.” Troy straightened. “That’s one I owe you.”

“Any time,” Ord said, and to double down, he kicked out at Troy to try and push him further along the track.

Troy caught the log-like leg and held it for a second or two. He knew he could have used an elbow strike on the patella to break Ord’s knee and incapacitate the big man in a blink. But he didn’t have the guns, and just a pace away, Lars was glaring at him, and would put him down like a dog.

He let the leg go. “Okay, I’m going, I’m going.”

Lars then grabbed him by the collar and shoved him.

Troy jerked himself away and then turned back to the dark jungle. He’d bide his time and sooner or later an opportunity would present itself. Even if he could take one of them out, that’d move the odds in their favour.

He continued for another few hundred yards and the jungle began to get thicker as he lost the animal trail he had been following, and his hunting knife wasn’t up to the job acting as a machete on the thicker vines. The cool mist settled on everything, and his clothing

was damp already, and moving beneath some of the larger fronds meant they sometimes poured water on him.

From time to time, the undergrowth rustled as creatures scuttled from his path. Some he thought were lizards that sped away on hind legs, some were bigger, and several times he also heard things moving in the tree branches above him.

But it wasn't until the jungle fell silent that he knew something else was in there. A flicker of movement dragged his head to the side just in time to see something around his height slowly pull back into the shadows.

That's not good, he thought.

CHAPTER 29

Troy continued, slowly, trying to keep his eyes on the forest ahead, either side, and from above. After a while he was sure they were being followed. There was some *thing*, or some several things, to his left side just behind the first line of foliage keeping pace with them.

Troy had seen enough nature programs where predators had followed a herd, assessing the individuals, and choosing one of the smaller or weaker members before launching a lightning attack.

He knew that a feint, a fake attack to cause the group to scatter, would be all that was needed. And then if the smaller Anne or Astrid, or even Elle, stepped just a single extra pace into the dark jungle, one or more of them would be dragged away.

He concentrated but found it hard to see more than several steps ahead. But he bet that somewhere just up there would be a place the hunters had chosen for their ambush.

Troy knew he needed to change it up before that happened. He stopped and spoke over his shoulder. "I need to take a leak."

"No, keep moving," Lars said.

"Urgent." Troy stepped closer to the wall of the jungle, and unzipped. He stared in through the foliage and his eyes adjusted to the gloom – yes, there they were – the big bodies standing near motionless. They were between six and seven feet tall, balanced on their hind legs like an ostrich, but that was where the similarity ended. Their necks were strong, and muscular. And the heads were boxy, and the skin was stretched tight over a face that was mostly forward-facing eyes and large jaws.

Troy narrowed his eyes and focussed; through they were in darkness, their bodies were covered in fur. Or feathers. Anne was right.

Their eyes were large and round, and they had frozen like statues, watching him, waiting to see if he stepped a little closer, immediately making him their choice.

"Why have we stopped?" Tygo asked, as back along the trail the big man couldn't see the front of the line.

"*Move!*" Lars warned.

Troy ignored him and stood there, his hand on his fly but there was no way he was going to pull himself out. Besides, he had read somewhere that the smell of urine or faeces enticed predators, and they knew that a prey animal is defenceless for the seconds it was pissing or shitting.

Lars' impatience got the better of him; he cursed and barged forward, and elbowed Bjorn and Elrik out of his way. The pair of men

were momentarily bumped aside, but then locked back together and formed a wall between Troy and Lars, and the rest of the group – a perfect shield for what Troy had planned.

The path was more animal track and caused them to string out. Ord remained in front of the women but looked over their heads, trying to see, and Tygo began to move forward as well.

Troy knew this would be a gamble, and he kept his back turned as if continuing to piss as Lars lumbered at him. Troy had to anticipate where the man was by the sound of his footfalls alone.

When he thought Lars was right on him, and just felt the touch of the gun in his ribs, he spun, stepping lightly aside, and grabbed the gun barrel.

Lars reflexively went to pull it back, and Troy used the man's momentum and all his strength to yank the gun from Lars' hand while flinging the man forward and into the jungle.

Troy quickly turned back to watch. He saw the big man sprawl onto his belly. He also saw the three statues suddenly come to life.

Lars rolled over, swearing loudly as he scrambled to his feet. But one of the things leapt forward, claws splayed like an array of kitchen knives and thumped down on his back with hugely muscled legs, flattening him to the ground with a whoosh of breath.

Another darted forward to grab the back of his neck into its jaws, and they compressed – immediately Lars' scream was cut off to a strangled whine.

Ord surged forward. "Where is Lars?" He pointed his gun from Elrik and Bjorn to Troy, who quickly secreted Lars' gun in his trouser belt.

Troy pointed at the jungle. "Something came out and grabbed him. It's still in there."

Ord didn't hesitate and surged in through the fronds and vines. Troy watched as the man entering was spotted immediately, and instead of fleeing from their prey, the trio of reptilian beasts picked up the now weakly struggling Lars between them and sprinted off with him stretched between them.

Troy watched them vanish. They didn't make a sound, and neither did Lars. Troy hoped he was already dead, or at least they would kill him before they began to tear him apart. He'd read somewhere that polar bears preferred to eat their prey alive. A horrible way to go.

"What has happened?" Tygo roared. "Where is Lars?"

The group coalesced into a tight bunch and Tygo yelled for Lars to return from the jungle.

"What was it?" Anne asked, her eyes round.

"Three of them," Troy said. "Your theropods I think; seven feet tall and covered in fur or feathers. They came out of the forest and took Lars."

“Holy shit.” Anne’s mouth hung open for a moment. “This is typical pack ambush behaviour.” She frowned as her mind worked. “But they hardly ever take on one of the strong and wait for an opportunity to take out one of the weaker or smaller members of a herd.”

“Maybe they see us all as weak,” Astrid replied.

“Yeah, good point,” Anne said.

Tygo barged to the front as Ord came back from the jungle.

“He’s gone,” Ord said. “But there’s blood.”

“What happened?” Tygo spoke through clamped teeth.

“I didn’t see everything. Just shadows.” Ord nodded toward Troy. “But he did.”

Tygo stepped forward and grabbed Troy by the shirt front and lifted him close to his bearded face. “Where is my man?”

“Your *man* decided to take a piss. He stepped too close to the jungle and was taken by something waiting in there.”

“Lars would never do that. He was a smart soldier.” Tygo shook Troy.

“It only takes one mistake. And now he is gone.” Troy grabbed the big man’s hand but couldn’t dislodge it. “I suggest we be extra vigilant. We’re being watched.”

Troy could see the distrust in the huge man’s eyes but banked on him thinking the story was plausible enough, and him still needing them for whatever purpose he had in mind.

Tygo’s eyes were furious but calculating. He continued to hold Troy.

“So, now there are two of us trying to manage five of you. With three men. You think these odds favour you now?” Tygo began to smile cruelly into Troy’s face.

Troy simply stared back, knowing that’s exactly how he saw it.

In a flash, Tygo drew a long hunting blade, whipped around and stuck it into the side of Bjorn’s neck. The young man reacted with a look of shock and a wet gurgle as he slid to the ground.

Astrid dived to the fallen man, screaming, her hands going to his neck that pulsed thick blood. Anne screamed and Elrik roared, charging forward.

Ord intercepted him and hit Elrik in the temple with the stock of his gun, knocking him down. Tygo pushed Troy back and grabbed Elle by the hair. She took a swing at him, but he shook the woman so hard her legs danced madly beneath her like a puppet.

He went to punch her as she struggled, but she gave him a look and oddly, he lowered his hand. Instead, he held the bloody knife in his hand and held it to her throat, leaving a wet red streak. Troy’s hands flexed, waiting to see what the man would do. If he looked about to cut her, Troy would chance using the gun. He glanced at Ord who held his rifle pointed at them, so guessed it’d be a suicide run if he

had to go through with it.

Elrik got to his feet, his eyes wet. "I'll fucking kill you. All of you."

"You already said that," Tygo replied evenly. "Your brother is dead. Do you want your sister to also die?"

Elrik glared, his teeth bared, and making a straining sound. His eyes streamed in pure, frustrated rage.

"Bjorn, stay with us," Astrid wailed. "Don't, please don't..." she begged.

Tygo snorted softly. "While the group behaves, there will be no more killing. But if you try anything, or if there is another *accident*, then another of you will die. Maybe your sister, maybe museum lady or vet lady. Or maybe businessman. Or maybe you. I don't care which. I only need a few of you."

"For what?" Troy demanded, but was ignored.

Elrik crouched beside his brother and put a hand over his eyes as he wept.

Tygo nodded. "I know, loss is painful. But now I have lost a man, and you have lost a man. We are even." He pushed Elle back into Anne.

"We need to bury him," Elle said with murder in her eyes.

"We better not. I'm sorry but there's no time," Anne grimaced. "The smell of fresh blood will carry throughout the jungle, buried or not. We need to be away from here quickly. Astrid?" she asked.

The veterinary woman looked up with wet eyes and after a moment nodded.

"You heard the smart lady. Leave him." Tygo nodded to Ord. "Mr. Strom is out front again. If he tries anything, kill him."

Troy sighed and turned back to the jungle. He had succeeded in getting rid of one of their captors, but got Bjorn killed. Things were going to shit, and they were still headed in deeper.

Troy looked into the jungle depths ahead of him. He sighed; at least he now had a gun.

He started in.

CHAPTER 30

"That's a grave," Anne said.

"It's so small," Elle replied.

There was a flat stone, three feet long and at one end pushed into the ground was a decaying, wooden cross.

Troy quickly glanced at the jungle and then knelt beside it. "There's writing scratched into it." He leaned closer, squinting at the cross. "In English."

Carved into its horizontal bar were several words. Troy read.

"Faithful Top. Best dog. Farewell little friend. Gideon Spilett." He looked up. "1864."

"An Englishman?" Tygo frowned, his thick eyebrows meeting angrily. "How did he get here?"

"They couldn't have come by boat or over land. So had to come by air, but the first airplane was the Wright Brother's Kitty Hawk that made its first flight in 1903." Anne scratched her head, and then raised her eyebrows. "Balloon maybe?"

"Then they were probably blown in by accident," Elle said as she stared at the tiny grave.

"Don't you see? Top. *Topper*." Troy lowered his head and began to shake with laughter. From behind, Anne lay a hand on his shoulder, probably thinking he was weeping.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

Troy looked up. "Topper, the dog, and Gideon Spilett, from the Jules Verne story." He began to laugh aloud. "We all thought it came from Verne's imagination."

Troy stood, brushing off his hands. "I read it when I was a kid. Jules Verne wrote about the Mysterious Island in 1874."

"Ten years later. How did they survive?" Anne asked.

"I don't think they did survive." Troy nodded down at the small grave. "In the story most of them sailed away in Captain Nemo's submarine. But that part was probably all fiction." He sighed. "Somehow Verne learned about them being here. But I think that germ of truth was wrapped in many layers of his wild imagination. I wish I had the book here now."

"Big help." Tygo nudged Troy with his boot. "Move."

The group moved off and in another fifteen minutes came to a small, languid stream. The water lumped and looked shallow but in most areas it was a murky brown so they couldn't see its exact depths, meaning there could be much deeper spots.

They followed the stream, with Anne warning them to be wary of ambush predators, both in the forest line, and from beneath the water.

They were making good progress, but soon they came to a reef of large boulders that blocked their path.

Troy looked at the size of sheer rocks, and then over the stream. "Options are to try and scale the rocks - not easy as they're flat surfaced - or we double back and head into the jungle to find a way around. Or..." he pointed. "We cross the stream and continue on the opposite bank."

He backed up close to Elle, who grabbed his arm while Tygo and his man talked through their choices.

She leaned closer. "The eye is going crazy in my head. It wants us to continue following the river."

"Then who are we to argue?" Troy looked back at the flowing water.

It was about 30-feet across, and some areas swirled and lifted in small waves as if flowing over hidden rocks beneath the surface. The problem was, the water was dark and murky, and whether it was 6-inches or 6-feet deep was unknown.

"I say we stick to the river," he sighed. "But I don't like it." He leaned out to look up and down the river for an easier place to cross.

Tygo was looking at the map with Ord, nodded and rolled it up. "We continue going forward." He waved his hand. "Mr. Strom, you go in first."

Troy chuckled. "Why did I know that was going to be my honour?"

Elrik dropped his pack and quickly began to rummage inside. He drew forth a length of soft rope and tossed one end to Troy.

"Tie this to your waist. When you get across, tie it off to something stable." He then examined the water. "Not so fast moving but it would be better to have a guide rope."

"Agreed, and good idea." Troy tied it around his waist, and Elrik secured the other end to a tree trunk.

"Good luck," Astrid said.

Elle stood next to him as he looked in at the moving water.

"This is probably a dumb idea." He half smiled.

She placed a hand lightly on his shoulder. "I wish I had my gun."

He turned to her, not sure if she was worried about him and wanting the gun for his protection or she was just having another dig at him over surrendering their weapons.

Troy felt the gun he had taken from Lars in the small of his back. If something attacked him, he'd be forced to use it and then give away any advantage he had. And he doubted Tygo or Ord would try and save him. They'd be more likely to laugh as he was eaten and then just move somewhere else to cross.

"Here goes." He stepped into the cool water, sinking to his calf, feeling the bottom with the toe of his boot. At least it wasn't muddy

and as rocky and firm as he hoped. The stones beneath his feet felt small and rounded, exactly as you would expect in moving water.

He stepped again, and the water went to above his knee. He sucked in a deep breath and kept going. The upside was the moving water would disrupt any predators from hearing or seeing him move across – at least that's what he told himself.

Troy reached around to feel the rope knotted at his back and gave it a tug. "A little bit more slack." He knew if he needed to move quickly, he didn't want Elrik holding the rope and slowing him down.

He took another step and dropped into a deep hole making the water go to his chest level. The air whooshed from his lungs from the sudden drop and also the chill of the water. He thought there was also something soft at the bottom of the hole that wriggled away from his boot – that scared him more than anything else. He quickly climbed out and continued, faster now.

He didn't have far to go, and once past a few more potholes and a submerged log, he clambered up the opposing bank. He untied the rope and then tied it off to a thick tree branch, so it was just a foot or so above the moving water.

"Roughly three feet deep. But some areas are deeper. Follow the way I came and use the rope as a guide. Who's next?" he yelled.

Tygo chose. "You."

Anne turned. "Me?"

"Yes, you, go," he said. "And hurry up."

"Oh goody." Anne grimaced and turned back to the dark water.

"You can make it," Troy said. "Slow and steady and watch out for the holes. Don't be scared, and don't let go of the rope."

She puffed air as though about to swim a mile. "It's not the river I'm scared of. It's what lived in primordial rivers."

Anne's lips set in a hard line. She stepped in and pushed and dragged herself across, keeping her eyes on Troy. In only minutes she came close to the bank. There was an area where the water shallowed into an elbow and without the stream's turbulence, it created a small pond and was clear. She looked down. "Hey." She looked about and then reached into the water. "Hi there, little fella."

"What are you doing?" Troy asked as he stretched out a hand to pull her out.

Instead, she lifted the small thing. It looked like a baby alligator but was smoother, thinner, and had no bony scutes over its skin.

"Do you know what this is?" she asked.

Troy shook his head. "Dinner?"

She snorted. "I think it's a *Pannoniasaurus*, a long extinct genus of tethysaurine mosasauroid known from the Late Cretaceous. It's unique because it's one of the very few, if not only, true fresh water

mosasaurs to have ever lived.”

“That’s a baby of that thing that attacked Elle’s brothers’ boat?” he asked.

She shook her head. “No-ooo, that was a marine species. This one evolved for fresh water only. Think of it as being like those porpoises in the Amazon that lived in the rivers and never go out to the sea. They evolved to live in freshwater.”

“Small.” Troy turned away to the rope line.

She smiled as she held it up. It made a small squawking noise. “Small now, but they grow to around 20-feet.”

Troy spun back. “Shit.” He turned back to the river.

Anne looked down and frowned. “I’m not sure where the others are, but odd it’s by itself.” She looked up. “Maybe it’s the last one that hasn’t been picked off by predators yet.”

A hundred yards further down the river, in a deeper area beneath a fallen tree, the mucous covered creature raised its head from the alcove it rested within. It detected the chemical scent of warm-blooded animals and a pair of fist-sized eyes looked out at the muddy water, seeing clearly as it had evolved to have excellent vision in the brackish environment. It was where it lived its entire life, where it mated, swam, and hunted.

Another of the creatures a little further down did the same. And then more. Soon, several of the six-foot long creatures began to use large paddle-like tails to power themselves up the moving stream to where the prey animals crossed.

Elle volunteered to go next, and Troy watched over her closely, but with her long athletic limbs she crossed easily. Then went Tygo, and Elrik. Astrid and Ord were to come last, and the man sent the vet on and didn’t bother waiting until she was across to untie the rope and begin to haul himself after her, bringing the rope with him.

Without the guide rope they were dragged a little further downstream by the current. Though Ord was able to use his powerful arms to reel himself in, Astrid lost her footing and then slid a little.

And then her foot must have gone into a hole as she went below the water and when she reappeared, she was five feet away from the rope and spluttering.

Ord stopped and briefly turned to the woman, but then seemed to get distracted by something and stared down at the water.

“Hey!” he shouted.

The group turned from the woman to Ord and Tygo walked back to the riverbank.

“Something in here,” Ord said and began to haul himself along the

line hand over fist without giving Astrid another look.

About 20-feet further down the river, Astrid had finally found some shallower water, but was struggling as the current rushed there and she went in and out of potholes, and fought against the faster moving muddy river.

Then she screamed.

Ord also began to punch down into the water.

“Got me!” he yelled. “Shark.”

Tygo stepped closer, but then changed his mind and spun to grab Troy by the front of his shirt.

“Go get him.”

“Fuck him.” Troy knocked the big man’s hand off and instead dived in toward Astrid.

Troy broke the water, sputtering and cursing and promising himself he’d kill that big asshole if it was the last thing he did. But right now, Astrid was in danger. And so was he.

Ord thrashed, and the murky water around him turned red. Troy half swam half walk-paddled to where the female vet had been, but he couldn’t see her now.

Then the top of her head came up just 6-feet from him, as well as a boiling surge of blood. Troy reached down to his belt and pulled his long knife free and dived toward her.

Beneath the water he couldn’t see a thing, but purely by luck he caught hold of her flowing hair. He used it to drag her to him, but she seemed overly heavy, and in fact, she seemed to be tugging against him – no, that wasn’t right – she was being tugged away from him.

He held on with one hand, surfaced to gulp in more air, and then back down. He knew she must be out of breath and assumed she was snagged on something below the surface.

Troy reached down her body, and then to his shock, his hand touched something slimy that was attached to her. It was large, a foot across, and he felt it ragging on her, moving its head side-to-side, like a dog with a bone.

He stabbed it, his blade sinking into the softness.

He then tried to drag her away, but felt something bump into him, and when he tried to get a better grip on her, felt more of the things attached to her – some big, some smaller.

He couldn’t see what it was, but his mind conjured something like an eel with shark teeth and a foot-wide head. And worse, there was more coming by the second.

In shifting his hands, he felt a wound on her back, and it was big. And something else: she wasn’t moving anymore.

Something bumped into Troy again, and this time went to nuzzle into him. He panicked and stabbed at it, making it turn away. But his

breath was exhausted, and he was starting to see pops of light as his brain was being starved of oxygen.

He'd had enough and let go of Astrid's body, hoping she was already dead, and surfaced to drag in a huge breath, and then splashed toward the shoreline.

Troy was a strong swimmer and sped toward the riverbank, and when he was able to touch the bottom, he leapt and dived hoping to outpace the things beneath the water. He rolled on the grass panting and Elle came and laid a hand on him.

"Astrid?" she asked.

He rolled away and coughed up muddy water, and just shook his head. "Something in there. Took her."

He watched with half blurred vision as the group dragged the screaming Ord from the water with the rope now looped around him, as he held on for grim death.

"Pull. *Hurry, hurry!*" he screamed.

Tygo, and reluctantly Elrik, began to drag him, but the combined weight of the big man, plus the moving water, made him extraordinarily heavy.

Anne then also joined in, and they slowly pulled him closer to the edge, trailing a stream of blood down the river.

In seconds more, they began to draw him up the bank, and Tygo reached down to grab his man under the arms and pulled him fully from the water. The big man came up still yelling. And something else came with him.

Troy now saw what it was that had attacked Astrid – still attached to Ord's leg, like it was a giant slimy leech, was a creature around 5-feet long. Fist-sized black eyes and its mouth fixed to his thigh, where blood leaked from either side of a wide set of jaws that were full of dark, triangular shark-like teeth.

Ord was dragged right up on the bank, and Tygo turned to stab the thing in the neck. The blade penetrated and went right through and into the meat of Ord's thigh, eliciting another scream of pain.

"Sorry," Tygo said but didn't look like he cared at all as he stabbed the thing again.

Elrik dropped the rope and went to sit on the bank, facing the water where Astrid had vanished. He rested his elbows on his knees and held his head in both hands.

The others managed to lever the thing off the Viking's thigh, where it left shredded clothing and a crescent wound where its razor teeth had dug in.

Tygo pointed to Elle. "Use your medical kit. Fix him."

Elle hesitated for a moment, but then opened her pack and took out the medicine pack they all had and used some iodine and cloth to

clean all the wounds on his thighs and arm and then bound the worst of them with a bandage.

Anne took the knife from Troy and used it to turn the muscular six-foot creature over. It looked like a giant black salamander, except it had tiny almost useless back legs. It was still alive, but out of the water it was stranded.

"This is amazing," she said.

"It's not amazing," Ord howled. "What is it? Is it poisonous?"

Anne looked up, grinning. "It's a tadpole."

"What?" Elrik scowled. "A tadpole took Astrid?"

"Crassigyrinus, means thick tadpole." She levered open the jaws displaying the wicked set of black, double teeth. "But this guy evolved to hunt and eat meat."

"It tried to eat *me*," Ord howled.

"Amphibious, but mostly aquatic. Two rows of sharp teeth, the second row having a pair of palatal fangs – see here?" She held the jaws open and pointed to the front of the mouth. "It's a powerful predator with a strong bite – look how big the jaws are."

"I fucking know," Ord said, holding his leg.

"We thought it was ideally suited for catching fish, as the paddle tail would have meant it was a strong and fast swimmer. And look at those eyes – this is either a nocturnal hunter or adapted to very murky water. Just like here."

Anne looked around. "This creature is very ancient, older than the dinosaurs, and from the time of the amphibians. And we're in the right area. The remains have only ever been found in northern Scotland." She sat back on her haunches to look down admiringly at the thing. "I'd love to..."

"Anne," Troy chided. "These things took Astrid."

The enthusiastic glint in her eyes went out, and she nodded. "Oh god. Sorry. I just... Sorry."

The gunshot made them all cringe, and Anne squeaked and leapt backwards.

Ord sat up with the gun pointed at the thing, and a hole punched right through its skull. He shot again, exploding one of its bulbous eyes.

"Now, we are even," he said.

"You idiot." Anne leapt to her feet, her fists balled.

Ord also got to his feet, hopping for a moment, and holstered his gun. "Sorry for killing your pet."

"I couldn't give a shit about that thing. I'm more worried about you alerting every predator within five miles to our location." She went to turn away but stopped and spun back. "And guess which one of us smells like fresh blood?"

CHAPTER 31

The group followed the river upstream for another quarter mile. The travelling was slow, not just because the forest was heavily overgrown near the water, but because Troy stopped them often because he was worried about the threat of concealed ambush predators.

Only once they encountered a creature waiting in the underbrush, but it was no bigger than a large dog, and Ord, still pissed off from the river attack, put several rounds into its scaled hide and sent it squealing into the foliage.

The man had a marked limp now, which made Troy smile, but he was in awe of the stamina and strength of him as he ploughed on without a murmur.

Troy looked upwards; their next challenge was having to scale a steep hillside with a waterfall beside them that fed the river. He clawed his way up, but on reaching the top, Troy could only stand with hands on his hips and shake his head.

“Ah, shit.”

It looked to be a shallow swamp, but he was sure, like the river, it concealed deeper spots. There was a primitive form of duckweed covering its surface making visibility below the water impossible.

The group joined him and Anne exhaled through pressed lips. “Chance of something being alive in there that might want to take a bite out of us, around ninety percent.”

“Yeah, it’s suicide.” Troy turned to Tygo. “For all of us.”

“Maybe you should go first and scout it,” Tygo grinned.

“Fuck off,” Troy replied. “I’d rather be shot than torn to pieces.” He held his arms wide. “Go ahead.”

Tygo lifted his gun but after a few seconds lowered it. “No use throwing away my best stalking horse just yet.”

There it was, Troy thought. He’s using us like mine sweepers. But what is he saving us for, and what does he know that we don’t?

Troy looked out over the swamp. Some of the trees rose on stilts meaning the water was low on oxygen, and stagnant. And evil looking vapors hung over the water with bubbles popping to the surface further out. Troy looked up, hoping for some other avenue to cross, but overhead it was hung with tattered plants like torn flags, dripping slimy liquid back into the water, and no purchase for them at all.

“No way around,” Troy said.

“We can build a boat,” Ord said.

Troy shrugged. “Maybe we could probably build a raft, but most of the wood around here is sodden, so doubt we’d be much above water

level.”

“I don’t want to go in the water again,” Elle said softly.

Troy turned to smile reassuringly. “Don’t worry, we won’t.”

Tygo walked forward to stand on the water’s edge. “Can’t go around. Can’t cross through.” He looked up at the greasy, dripping canopy overhead. “Can’t go over.”

He picked up a stone and tossed it fifty feet out into the dank water, where it splashed down. Immediately, something below the water surged toward the spot.

Troy turned to Anne. “Correction, chance of something being in there, one hundred percent.”

Troy narrowed his eyes, concentrating on the spot to see what happened next. Sure enough, two stalks appeared with fist-sized bulbs on them and lifted like periscopes. They seemed to regard the people on the bank for a moment before submerging. But the tell-tale sign of something moving below the water told them whatever it was, was gliding stealthily towards them.

The big man backed up from the water’s edge. He drew his weapon and Ord came and stood beside him; his gun also drawn. But he also held Troy’s confiscated Sig Sauer in his other hand.

“Get ready,” Tygo said, and Troy, Elrik, Elle, and Anne backed right away from the water.

Then the thing rose up in the shallows. The creature was like a massive plate, twenty feet around, and from its front extended a huge pair of muscular pincers.

“It’s a crustacean... a crab!” Anne yelled.

It was a brick red color with black tips on the ends of pincers that were hugely powerful and were lined with spines. It began to climb the bank on pointed legs, its bulb eyes twitching and both of them fixed on Tygo.

To their credit, both he and Ord never budged, and began to fire round after round into the impossible-to-miss target. Most struck the shell of the crab and though some blasted away some of the thick carapace, most were deflected.

“The face,” Tygo yelled, and then the pair of men concentrated their fire on the moving mouthparts, where the shell was thinner.

The crab was nearly on them, and the largest of the pincer arms extended forward, and Troy had no doubt it could have crushed either man with ease or pulled them apart like tissue if it got hold of them.

But their ammunition held and the small plates around its mouth began to be damaged and a slimy looking mucous dribbled free. The crab stopped and then began to retreat.

Tygo lifted his aim, held the gun in two hands, centred himself, and fired twice, exploding one of the eye bulbs. That was it, the crab drew

back and began to sink back into the stagnant water.

In seconds more that surface closed over it, and the water settled to stillness. Gun smoke joined the already steamy atmosphere, and the group stood in silence and just watched the water.

"It's probably still there," Anne said. "Or others."

Tygo began to nod. "Yes, probably." He turned to Ord with a grin. "Then we need to clear them out."

He reached into his pocket and drew out two grenades. He pulled the pin on one and tossed it out to the point where the crab had risen from. He waited, and in two seconds more came a whump and a spray of water.

Immediately there was a wave surge but moving away in many directions as whatever was below the surface, crab or other beasts, began to flee from the excruciating percussion blast.

"One to get their attention." He pulled the pin on the second grenade. "And two, to send them all back to Hell." He tossed the second grenade further out, where it detonated in a similar geyser of murky water and mud.

This time, nothing moved away.

Tygo grunted and nodded. "And now, they're gone." He turned to Troy. "Let's go, Mr. Strom. After you, of course."

EPISODE 07

“It is said that the night brings counsel, but it is not said that the counsel is necessarily good” — Jules Verne

CHAPTER 32

Year of 1020 – Lemuria, the Mysterious Island – to face the dragon

Ulf's remaining Viking crew ran hard through the tangled forest. Njal swung his axe, cleaving trees and vines from their path as the others followed close behind.

Behind him the sound of pursuit was undiminished – it seemed the massive beast had a taste for them now and the chieftain turned to look over his shoulder and saw a mighty tree pushed aside as if it was nothing but a reed.

In that few seconds, he saw the creature outlined against the twilight glow through the canopy – massive and hulk-shouldered. It seemed to be covered in some sort of spiky fur that shimmered and rippled, blending in and out of the dappled forest colors as it charged.

The thing ran on four colossal legs, sometimes, and two on others, and then the front two arms lifted as it ran and each with three claws and long talons that shredded his men's flesh like knives.

But its head was where the nightmare began – as large as a house with tusk-like teeth where his warriors' clothing and flesh still hung in ribbons between them.

"The *Jörmungandr*," Ulf breathed. It had to be the Midgard dragon serpent, the enemy of Thor, and he put his head down to run again. He gave Brynhilde a push to urge her faster, and she bumped into old Frode who chose that time to trip over his own feet.

Some men ran over the top of him, but Ulf and Njal stopped and dragged him back up. But in those few seconds, the creature bore down on them.

Ulf was caught between fleeing and leading his warriors, or staying with his oldest friend, Frode.

In that few seconds of indecision, Brynhilde appeared and grabbed the fur of his coat, dragging his face toward hers and fiercely kissing him. She then pushed him back and pointed her blade at Njal.

"Go! Get our chieftain to the boat." Then she grinned at him. "I'll see you again, my lord. *In Valhalla*."

Njal threw her his wooden shield and the giantess nodded to him, and then turned and banged her long sword against the hardened wood.

"No!" Ulf roared as Njal dragged him back while he still also held old Frode's cloak.

"My queen," he said, wanting to fight, wanting to stay with her.

But the strength of Njal and his broad shoulders was too much for him and he was borne away.

“*I will find you again!*” Ulf yelled as he continued to watch over his shoulder as he was dragged away.

Brynhilde turned one last time to stare at him, her single green eye flashing with the heat of battle. Then she faced back to the monster and braced her legs wide. She held her sword and shield high, and though the creature towered over her by ten times, it slowed, its red eyes glowing like burning coals in a fire. Perhaps it was confused by the challenge of the tiny being.

“*Valhalla!*” Brynhilde roared again and didn’t just hold her ground, she charged.

But the creature did exactly as it had to Njal, and Arne, and all the others, and spat the vicious vomit at her. Some splashed the forest all around them and covered the end of Frode’s arm. But it fully covered his woman, and immediately her shield rotted away, and then her entire body began to steam, and the visible flesh reddened. His lover, Brynhilde’s voice sung with agony, and every note seared his soul.

Ulf’s eyes watered and he felt his gorge rise as the brave female warrior’s body began to sag like hot wax with just the sticks of her bones protruding. The great beast then bent to suck up the streaming pile.

That was enough and though Ulf’s blurred vision streamed with tears of rage and loss he turned to run faster than ever before until he reached the beach. He dragged the old man with him who moaned in pain, his hand dripping red blood and liquid flesh.

His men were already pushing the *Skidbladnr* out, and the same for the Svalbjorn. He grabbed at Frode, but the old man held up his rotting hand, and as he watched, the melting flesh moved up his arm. Whatever was happening to it, its burning had not stopped.

Ulf pushed his old friend back a step, drew his sword and in one swift stroke severed the ruined hand and forearm that by now was just reddened, stick-like bones with some strings of softened meat still attached.

He had him wrap it in his cloak, and then pushed him toward the *Skidbladnr* and at its gunwale, hefted him over the side like a sack. He too leapt in and yelled orders. In seconds their boat was first away from the shore.

But without Brynhilde, their boat master, the Svalbjorn crew were disorganised and just seconds too slow, and that meant Odin’s luck wasn’t with them – right before the ship, the wall of jungle exploded as the monstrous beast burst forth and charged. Some of the men stood and drew their weapons, some huddled in the belly of the longboat, and others leapt over the side and began to swim away.

It didn’t matter, it spat its hellish vomit at the boat, then stamped on one fleeing man, and ripped another in half. Then, raw or burned,

it consumed them all. Once done with the ship it then waded into the water to pick up the swimming souls. None escaped.

Ulf lowered his head and screwed his eyes shut momentarily to cast an oath; there would be many souls departing for Valhalla that night. He looked up and his breath caught in his throat as he saw the dragon's burning eyes on them. Then it began to swim. Towards them. Ulf threw himself onto one of the oars and began to drag on it.

“Row. *Row for your lives!*” He bellowed.

CHAPTER 33

Troy wiped his brow. It was two hours since they had left the swamp behind, and other than insect bites, and a few leeches the size of bananas, they had been left alone.

Troy still led the group followed by Elrik and he stumbled, not seeing the mass of tree roots in the shadows.

“Is it my imagination or is it growing darker?” Elle asked.

“It’s not your imagination.” He looked about. “All our watches have stopped, but it’s got to be nightfall soon.”

“Might not be the smartest idea to spend the night in here,” Anne said.

“I don’t think that’s going to be our call.” Troy thumbed over his shoulder at Ord, who reached forward to push him in the center of his back.

In another few minutes they entered a section of the forest that had more open land between the huge trees. The canopy above had closed in, and the already poor light meant they were travelling in near darkness. And Troy knew that was an insane thing to do in this primordial place.

Anne pulled a pair of night goggles from her kit, and Elrik, Elle, and Troy did the same. Ord and Tygo immediately took them from Elrik and Elle and pulled them over their faces.

Troy moved slowly, and everything being a fluorescent green made it difficult to obtain a proper depth perspective. It was after trekking another few minutes that the odor hit him. And he didn’t like it.

Troy turned slowly, looking first at the ground level, and then raising his vision. Then higher. His heart nearly exploded in his chest, and he reached out to grab Elle who was nearly blind in the darkness.

“Everyone...” he whispered, “...get behind a tree trunk.”

“What is it?” Anne crept forward to stand beside him.

Tygo and Ord stayed in the open looking about, which was fine with Troy, and Elrik soon pressed himself up against Troy’s tree trunk.

Elle had her back to the tree next to him. “I can’t see a thing,” she said. “But I can sure smell something.”

Ord and Tygo then found their own massive trunk. Troy took his goggles off and slid them over Elle’s head. Anne leaned closer.

“Look – between those two biggest trees at about 11 o’clock.”

Elle and Anne turned to where he said.

“Just trees,” Elle whispered.

“Keep looking up,” Troy said softly.

The women did as asked.

“Ho-*oooly* Mary.” Anne involuntarily stepped back, and Troy caught

her to stop her stumbling back out in the open.

"Is that a dinosaur?" Elle's voice was tight in her throat.

"Big. So big," Anne said. "I've only ever seen bones, or maybe depictions from special effects in movies. But seeing a live one, is..."

"Yeah, I know. And it's a carnivore, right?" Troy asked. "It was the smell of its breath that alerted me. I've been close to big cats before and it's like that."

"Absolutely a dinosaur. And those horns on its head; maybe carnosaur, or an allosaurus." Anne shook her head. "No, wait, it's bigger than that. Maybe an *Epanterias*, a sub species, it's rarer, but bigger – ten tons, fifty feet, twenty at the shoulder, easy."

"Why didn't it attack us?" Troy asked. "We nearly walked right into it."

"The slight breeze is in our faces and look at those tiny eyes; it hasn't got great vision and is definitely not a night hunter," she replied.

"So, it's sleeping?" Elrik asked hopefully.

As if in response, the massive creature lifted its head and then inhaled deeply.

"No, like I said, it doesn't have great night vision, but still can hunt at night, just by using its extraordinary sense of smell." Anne reached out and grabbed Troy's arm. "It hasn't caught our scent yet, but it soon will. Then it'll find us. We need to get the hell out of here."

"Damn right." Troy turned to look over his shoulder, but without the goggles was night-blind.

"The one upside is, there shouldn't be any smaller predators hanging around with that monster in the vicinity," Anne said.

"We shouldn't be hanging around either." Troy turned. "I can't..."

Elle took the night vision goggles off her head and handed them back to him. He put them on, and then saw a possible path out of the clearing and in the direction they needed to go. They just needed to make a small deviation around the beast.

"Okay, we head toward the large furry tree-trunk, and I can see just past it a row of smaller trees that can give us cover. We make it there and we can stay low and put some distance between us." He exhaled. "It'd improve our chances if we had a diversion."

"What is happening?" Tygo said in a harsh whisper.

It was loud enough for them all to hear clearly. As well as the huge dinosaur. It lowered its massive box-like head and sniffed deeply in their direction.

"Asshole," Troy hissed.

"It'll see us soon. It's homing in now." Anne nudged him. "We're running out of time, and when this big guy gets going, can probably run at 30 miles per hour."

“Okay. Okay.” Troy turned. “Then we need a diversion.” He looked around and picked up a fist-sized rock.

As he did Ord created his own diversion – he lit a flare and tossed it. At them. Tygo and Ord then sprinted away. Troy was sure he heard them laughing.

“Those bastards,” Troy spat and leapt out, grabbing the flare and tossed it toward the huge creature.

Its huge head swung after it, staring at the tiny dot of flaring red light, and probably night-blinded for just a few seconds.

“Go!” Troy yelled and the four of them ran for the large tree, went around it, and headed for the cover in amongst the smaller bushes.

Behind them came a thunderous noise of trees being smashed, and beneath their feet they felt the vibrations of the massive creature’s pounding footfalls.

“Faster!” Troy yelled and held Elle’s arm to guide her.

Anne ran beside Elrik, also guiding him through the dark forest, and between them they navigated a path, but too slowly as the sound of deadly pursuit was getting closer.

Out to their right flank they saw Tygo and Ord running in the same direction and together all of them came to a small clearing of around a hundred feet across. Troy was first out, and further down the forest line he saw Tygo and Ord deciding on a way across.

Troy went to lead his small team across, but then saw something that chilled him. “Stop!” he yelled.

“We don’t have time to stop!” Anne yelled back.

Troy pulled another flare and cracked it. He tossed it out into the clearing and saw the hundreds of pointed legs sticking out from manhole-sized lids with silken web surrounding them.

“Are they spiders?” Elle’s teeth showed in her grimace.

“That’s what they look like to me,” Troy said. He turned. “Anne?”

“If they are, they’re probably *Nephila jurassica*, *Megarachne*; there are several monstrous species of arachnid. We just don’t know if they contained deadly venom or not,” Anne replied. “But deadly or not, they all had venom, and the size of those means they could pump a lot into you.”

“Even if the venom only numbs you, I really don’t want a dead leg right now.” Troy looked back over his shoulder as a tree was pushed over not fifty feet behind them. “Shit.” He spun back to the field, deciding.

“Look, all around the flare,” Elrik said.

Sure enough, the trapdoor lids closest to the brilliant flare were closed tight, and just a little further away in the dark field the spiders still waited in their traps.

“Night hunters then,” Anne said. She pulled two flares, one in each

hand and cracked them both. "*Geronimo!*" she yelled and holding them out before her ran out into the clearing.

"Crazy." Troy grinned with admiration. But then cracked his own flare.

The others did the same and the four people raced into the clearing. As they approached each trapdoor, the lid slammed tight as the muscular looking giant spiders pulled in under their lids to avoid the light.

As the group neared the other side of the clearing, an explosion of foliage and branches turned to splinters as they greeted the arrival of the massive carnivore. It roared as its tiny eyes caught sight of the retreating people holding flares, and the sound was like a physical force that made Troy feel nauseous deep down in his gut.

It reminded Troy of the time he had a mission where they had needed to deep-dive off a beach in South Australia to recover sensitive cargo from a downed plane and he and his fellow divers had been menaced by a 22-foot great white shark. Being in the water with the monster had scared the shit out of him, as he knew it was far faster and more vicious than he ever could be. And worse, he was in its world, and the shark knew it.

He felt like that now.

The group sprinted from the field into the forest, running fast. Luckily it became more overgrown and tangled, and though there was space for the people to manoeuvre between the twisted limbs, vines, and thick ferns, it slowed the huge theropod dinosaur down just enough to keep them out in front.

Troy knew that something needed to change, because if it slowed, they got to survive a little longer. But if they slowed, they'd be dead. And eaten.

Then in the next instant they pushed through the last veil of thick forest vine. The group stopped, and just stared.

A hundred feet further down, Tygo pushed through the green wall as well. The big man also stared and then held his hands out as if about to commence praying.

"Odin's fortress." Elle whispered.

It was an ancient building that looked as old as time itself. It stood on a rise just past a plain of marshy looking land covered in broad and glistening lily pads. It was adorned with massive columns, arc windows, and colossal steps, and all constructed using titanic blocks that might have been granite that Troy bet had once been polished, but now were weathered by countless millennia.

But the most interesting aspect was there was a red glow coming from inside the doorway and through the arced windows. And it softly pulsed.

Tygo and Ord moved along to join them.

"The fortress of the All Father." Tygo crushed his eyes shut for a moment as if in religious ecstasy. "Guarding the heart of a god."

"We made it," Ord breathed.

Troy bared his teeth. "No thanks to you and your flare, you sonofa..."

An almighty roar announced the arrival of the carnosaur, and the group cringed as a large tree was pushed down just a few dozen feet back in the tangled growth.

"Go, go, go!" Troy yelled.

Troy turned to face the open ground and strode a few paces and saw the large flat pads that glistened with some sort of mucous over them. He also saw that the vines running between the pads had brutal looking inch-long thorns, but they shouldn't bother their leather boots.

"Don't step on the pads," he said. "They might be like some sort of Venus fly trap."

The group carefully ran between them, with Troy leading Elle, and Anne taking Elrik, however, the soft red glow of the castle or fortress ahead gave them a little more illumination now. Tygo and Ord also moved forward, their longer legs quickly outpacing the group.

"We're going to get caught on the open ground," Elrik said as behind them the wall of forest exploded with the head and shoulders of the massive beast crashing through. Its sedan-sized boxy head leaned out, tiny eyes scanning the field, and jaws open.

Troy glanced over his shoulder and saw the monster went to take a step, but then stopped. Oddly, Troy thought, it remained silent. The massive creature inhaled, sniffing deeply, and then inexplicably, it silently pulled back into the forest. In seconds more it was gone.

The group had all stopped to watch, feeling relieved but confused. Troy knew all of them expected to see the thing reappear, but its shuddering footfalls became fainter until it left, then silence once again.

Tygo and Ord shrugged and continued toward the building.

Troy continued to watch the forest line. "What just happened?"

"It didn't like something," Anne said. "Something it smelled or sensed."

She crouched before one of the large flat pads and reached out a hand and touched its edge. She pulled back and her finger stuck for a moment, and then long strings of viscous glue-like material came with it.

She stood and wiped her hand on his pants leg. "Good idea to avoid walking on them, they *are* a trap."

"Maybe the large dinosaur has had experience with them," Elle remarked.

Anne shook her head. "That thing weighed ten tons. These pads wouldn't bother it, or the thorns."

Elle turned to Troy and covered her eye patch with a hand. She grimaced.

"Sore?" he asked.

"The orb, it's going crazy," she whispered back. "And it feels hot."

"Take it out, I'll cover you." Troy walked a few paces to the side and kept watch, while Elle quickly removed the orb and replaced it with her glass eye. She went to put it in her pocket, but Troy held his hand out. Elle hesitated for a moment, and handed it over, and he slipped it in his pocket.

Troy nodded and headed off to where Tygo and Ord had stopped about fifty feet out from the structure totally enfolded within the roots of a titanic tree, and stared up at the massive set of steps. In seconds more the group stood with them.

Tygo spoke without turning. "I think we will go together. But of course, you may have the honour of leading us in, Mr. Strom." Tygo then pointed at Elle and her older brother. "You go too. I want you three to walk in front of us. The science lady may stay by my side as she is proving more valuable than all three of you together."

"Great," Anne said with little enthusiasm.

Troy turned. "Give me a few minutes."

He walked forward, carefully avoiding the sticky lily pads and was soon at the first of the massive steps before it, each riser being about 4-feet high.

The home of a god was right, he thought.

Curiosity burned in him to see what it was that was gently pulsating inside. If it was the giant ruby heart, there was no way he was going home without it. Tygo or no Tygo, he planned to have the prize. He needed it.

Without waiting for his safety assessment, the huge Viking pushed Elle and Elrik forward, giving them a dozen feet head start before he, Ord, and Anne followed.

Troy climbed up onto the first of the huge steps and turned to look around once again at the surrounding forest. The thing that struck him was the seeming absence of other animal life. He expected nocturnal activity might be restrained here, but there was no movement and very little sound.

He lifted himself up a few more steps and stopped to look back at the group – all quiet, and most looked up at him, watching intently and waiting. He put his finger to his lips and turned back to lift himself up the next few steps.

There was about twenty of them rising about 60-feet from the lily pad plane, and at the top, he didn't bother turning back or even

waiting, but instead peered in through the doorway.

“Oh wow.” A huge smile split his face, and he headed in.

The entire room was bathed in the soft red glow from the pulsating light at its centre. Troy glanced at the treasure around the room – huge tubs and chests overflowing with gold coins, cut stones, some raw and rough, and of every hue. There was silver weaponry, jewellery that he assumed had been looted and offered as tribute to the greatest Viking god, Odin.

He also saw there were strange marks on the ground that had the sticks of bones jutting from their edges. Something had been burned there. Or rather melted, he thought.

But his gaze was drawn to the massive red stone on the plinth. Its glow throbbed with a life of its own, and as he neared it, he felt his back teeth begin to ache, and his eyes watered like when you get too close to a fireplace and the heat dries your eyes out.

As if in a trance, Troy approached the huge blood-coloured gem. He saw it was cut, sort of, and rather than a faceted or raw stone it was smoothed and slightly oval, and had a clarity that was breathtaking.

When Troy was just six feet from the stone, trance-like, he lifted an arm and slowly reached out a hand.

“Stop.”

Troy froze.

Tygo had his gun pointed directly at him. “Do *not* touch the heart of the All-Father with your unworthy hands.”

Troy scoffed and turned. He dropped his arm. “Be my guest.” He stepped back.

Tygo spoke briefly to Ord, who pulled his weapon, and glanced from Elrik to Troy, covering them.

The Viking leader then advanced slowly toward the large red stone. His face was lit by the red glow, and his eyes were wide.

Troy saw that the big man’s expression was one of rapture.

“I can feel it,” Tygo whispered, and then louder. “*I can feel it!*”

Behind him Ord filled his pockets with coins and gems. Elrik shrugged and did the same.

Tygo squinted and stepped right up to the glowing gem and placed his hands on either side of it. He moaned almost sexually. “It. Feels. Strange.”

“It might be radioactive. Or highly magnetic,” Anne whispered.

The Viking then lifted the gem and as soon as he removed it from the plinth it stopped pulsating and the glow faded away. However, as Tygo held it aloft, it was still the most beautiful thing Troy had ever seen.

“Some say the heart stone fell from the sky.” He faced the gem. “But true Vikings know it came from the mighty chest of the Old Father.”

Tygo turned and saw the group staring at him. He scowled. “Look away, scum; you’re not worthy.”

Troy snorted. “Neither are you.”

Tygo ignored him and continued to be transfixed by the ruby, but Troy knew that now he had his gem, there was no need for any of them anymore. He now knew that the Viking had kept them alive just so he could use them as human shields against any attacks – the more of them there were the better the odds he’d escape with his life.

As he pondered his escape, he suddenly noticed the overpowering stench settling over the room. He turned to Anne who frowned and began to turn to look to each of the entrances and doorways, looking for the source of the foul odor.

There was a sound like a wet cough. And then Elrik screamed.

CHAPTER 34

Everyone spun toward him and saw the man holding his bare head.

“What’s happening?” Troy frowned and took a few steps toward him.

Closer, he saw he was now covered in what looked like some sort of glutinous slime. But as he watched, steam rose from him and then the clothing slid from his body.

“Elrik!” Elle screamed and went to run to him, but Troy caught and held her.

Elrik managed to call her name, and it was the most agonising thing Troy had ever heard, or seen in his life. Because then the man held his hands up to stare at them as they turned blood red. Before their eyes his hair slid away, followed by the skin sloughing off his hands first, and then in a ghastly scene that Troy would remember his entire life, it slid from his face.

Elrik was now a skull with eyes dissolved into empty sockets, but his agonised scream went on and on.

Anne screamed and staggered backward, and Troy clamped his teeth together to keep from vomiting, as the man firstly collapsed to his knees and then fell forward onto all fours as if praying while his entire body turned to a thick boiling mush.

Elle slumped in his arms, which he was thankful for. Because in seconds more, Elrik was nothing but a steaming pile of lumpy liquid with a few bones poking out. Troy now knew what those other marks on the ground were – others who had suffered the same fate.

“It’s not possible,” Anne sounded out of breath and terrified, and Troy turned to see her backing toward the door, but staring not at Elrik, but up at the ceiling.

He followed her gaze and saw the roof above them was broken open by the muscular tree roots and limbs enfolding the building, but what sent a shock right through his body was the head of the largest creature that he had ever seen in his life leering in at them.

It looked too big to be real, and its red eyes were fixed, not on them, but on Tygo who held the gem.

Tygo had been staring at the remains of Elrik but must have sensed the thing and his head jerked up so he also saw the great beast.

“The dragon comes,” he yelled and raised his gun to fire several times into the thing’s face and then spun to sprint to the entrance, with Ord right on his shoulder.

“Run, run!” Troy yelled.

Anne was already out the huge doorway, followed by Tygo and Ord.

Troy was being left behind as Elle was still moving groggily under his arm.

“Wake up, please...” He shook her.

“What...? I thought my brother...” Her eyes fully opened, and she blinked several times. Elle’s eyes then focussed... on the dragon, and they opened wide enough to look like they were going to pop from her head. She drew in a huge breath.

“*We gotta go.*” Troy pulled her out through the entrance. In seconds more they were bounding down the steps, trying not to lose their balance on the oversized risers.

Tygo and Ord had already overtaken Anne and were twenty feet in front. From behind, Troy could hear the massive body of the thing as it lowered itself inside the building.

He glanced back over his shoulder, relieved to see the thing had not yet chosen to follow them because it wanted to suck up the now liquid remains of Elrik – horrifying, but it gave them a few extra precious seconds.

Was this the great beast that the Vikings had tried to depict on their boat prows over the centuries? Was this the dragon from countless legends that burned people alive, not with fire, but with acid?

In seconds more they were navigating their way around the sticky lily pads, and Anne reached out a hand as she stumbled.

Troy glanced back, and saw the thing had finished consuming Elle’s older brother. He came abreast of Anne. “What the hell is that thing?”

“I have no idea. No carnivore has ever existed in the fossil record of that size. It might be an aberration...” She turned back and then to the front again and tried to accelerate. “Or it might be endemic to just this place. Remember the bones on the beach.” She glanced at Troy. “Who knows what radiation that gem was giving off.”

“It’s obvious; the drekka, like Lemuria, is no legend,” Elle said, now fully alert.

The group finally reached the line of forest and paused to drag in deep breaths. Troy looked back in horror to now see the land leviathan snaking over the roof, around the colossal tree trunk, and down the steps.

Anne also turned and stood transfixed. For the first time they saw the shape of the creature – it stood on four legs, with scales bigger than a door. And those scales were covered in moss and other strange growths as if the dragon-like beast was as ancient as the island. Wicked spikes and spines rose from its back and head, and each claw was nearly the size of a full grown man.

The ground shook with each titanic step it took.

“Look, it uses both bipedal and quadrupedal motion,” Anne said,

her eyes wide.

“No time for sightseeing.” Troy grabbed at her and spun her around. “We’re getting out of here.”

From up ahead they heard two quick gun shots, and Troy felt for the gun still tucked in the back of his pants.

“What are those idiots doing?” Anne seethed.

“Hopefully they might draw it away from us,” Elle replied.

“For all we know they’re shooting at us to slow us down to save themselves,” Troy added.

They came to the spider clearing, and caught up to Tygo and Ord. But the pair were frozen and Tygo turned to Troy and put a finger to his lips. He then nodded to the open ground.

Troy squinted into the darkness and could then make out the huge shape of the carnosaur standing out in the open, and its big boxy head was pointed right at them.

“Oh, shit. Not now.” Troy looked over his shoulder. From behind there came the sound of massive trees being crushed and pushed aside as something titanic was coming at them, and he knew they were caught.

“We’re between the furnace and the fire – we’re trapped,” he said.

Tygo scoffed. “Then I choose the fire.” He pulled out a flare, cracked it to life, and waving it before him, set off across the spider plane. Ord, with gun drawn, stayed close behind. As the blinding light kept the spiders in their burrows, he also held it aloft hoping to keep the dinosaur back.

It didn’t.

The carnosaur advanced, one huge, clawed foot eased down, and the three-clawed toes reminded Troy of an oversized ostrich foot if you added about ten tons of muscle.

As Tygo swept the flare back and forth, Ord was hunched behind and he peered around his leader’s body, trying to stay in the blinding glow of the flare. But, from behind him one of the spiders shot out of its burrow and latched onto his leg.

Troy gritted his teeth, almost feeling Ord’s pain, as the man howled, and turned to smash down on the dog-sized arachnid with the butt of his gun. He could imagine the finger-length fangs digging into the back of his leg, and he guessed they’d soon know if it was venomous or not.

Ord punched down over and over as the creature that looked like a mix of muscular dark body and plastic tubing tried to retreat, taking the big man with it. And the spider must have been enormously strong as Ord was a big and well-muscled man and he was sagging from the effort.

Another spider lunged at Tygo, latching onto him, and causing him

to drop the gem. It rolled away as the big man pulled his handgun and pumped about four rounds into the creature causing it to snap back into its hole like a jack in the box. Then he shot the one holding onto Ord. It too let go and vanished.

But the mad gyrations of the pair of men must have been exciting for the dinosaur that roared so loudly it made the hair prickle on Troy's scalp. And then it began its charge.

Tygo was torn as his focus went to the gem lying about a dozen feet from him, and then back to the charging dinosaur. It roared again as it bore down on him. It made up his mind for him and he turned to run.

But for Ord, the venom must have kicked in as he limped away with a dead limb. Tygo was first to the opposite line of trees and vanished.

Ord was slow and turned to fire uselessly over his shoulder. But then from the tree tops not a hundred feet further down from them, the dragon's massive head loomed over the canopy.

Ord froze, but the carnosaur's eyes weren't on the stranded human, but instead on the dinosaur. Like an adult facing a child, the ten-ton sauropod turned to face something that must have weighed a hundred tons. Ord seized his chance and disappeared into the thick foliage.

"This is why the dinosaur abandoned its attack before – it knew this was the dragon's territory," Anne whispered.

The carnosaur must have known its limitations as it immediately turned to flee, but not before the dragon spat a long stream of its venom at the retreating dinosaur and covered half of its back.

Troy had never seen a giant carnivorous prehistoric beast before. And certainly, never heard one scream in agony. But he stood, mouth hanging open as he watched the dinosaur flee in pain and terror. And the monstrous dragon went after it.

"Now!" Troy yelled, pumping a flare, and together the trio sprinted hard across the open field, leaping over, or dodging around the spider holes.

As Troy headed across the spider field waving a flare as he went, his goal was not the opposite line of forest, but Odin's heart, and he scooped up the giant ruby like a dropped football without missing a step. He was immediately surprised by its weight, and warmth, and he dragged the backpack off his shoulders to quickly tuck it inside. All the while Elle watched him closely and he felt her eyes on him like they were laser beams.

Behind them, Anne jinked around one spider hole and then went to dodge another when the creature came fully out. It was far bigger than she probably expected and was easily three feet across, with its long front legs thrown up at her.

Troy was a few dozen feet in front, and he turned, holding up the flare. In the glint of the flame, he saw it reflected in the monstrosity's

multiple glass-like eyes. It easily caught the woman and as its front legs had tiny hooks on the ends, they snagged her pants, tripping her and she fell hard – that was all the advantage the huge spider needed.

In a flash it began to haul her back to the safety and privacy of its tunnel lair.

“Help!” Anne screamed.

Elle was closest and paused to glance at her but keeping still gave more spiders an opportunity to reach her. Elle then turned away and ran toward the forest line.

Anne swore and tried to roll away from a spider, but it scrabbled for a better hold, and then its fangs dug into her thigh.

She screamed again, this time in pain, and let go of the ground. Her hands went to the spider’s head to try and pummel it, but in that instant the spider fully pulled her toward the pitch-dark hole and began to tug her in.

Still screaming, Anne went with it.

“Anne!” Troy sprinted toward her and arrived just as she vanished into the hole and the manhole-sized trapdoor closed over her.

Eight feet out Troy dived and slid to the hole. He used brute strength to rip the mesh lid open that was now glued down, but he couldn’t fully tear it away, such was the strength of the silken bonds that held it in place. Underneath was just a dark hole with a silken lining.

From inside he heard Anne scream, and he reached in and shone his light – about 5-feet down he saw her face streaked with tears, dirt, and ripped with fear – and he understood why – she was being dragged into a giant spider hole to be consumed alone in the dark, and while she was alive.

He dived in after her. His backpack swung forward, with the giant ruby within it, but worming his way down he managed to reach her fingertips with his outstretched hand.

Just his thighs were now wedged wide behind him, and he knew if he went in any further he would never be able to worm his way back out, let alone pull Anne from the monster’s grip.

“Grab my hand!” he yelled.

“It’s got me,” she wailed. “I can’t...it’s got me.”

Troy strained and felt hands, he hoped, alight on his legs, waist, and then backpack straps, trying to drag him out.

He half turned his head. “Not yet,” he yelled but doubted Elle could have heard him.

He strained a little more, and to her credit, Anne did the same, reaching up, her fingers questing for his. But as soon as she did, he saw she was tugged again and slid another few inches into the pit.

Troy had no idea how far the spider’s lair went but had heard the

trapdoor spiders from Australia could build burrows up to a foot deep – and they were only about an inch long, so this thing might have a burrow that went down twenty feet. If it got Anne any more than six feet in, she'd be lost forever.

Troy slid in a little more, chancing it and hoping that Elle was there to haul him up. He stretched now until his shoulder popped and finally his fingers touched hers. The physical contact encouraged them both to strain a fraction more, and he managed to get hold of her hand.

Anne burst into tears, and both held on tight.

He tried to use his legs to pull himself out but found he could not get enough leverage. He used his other free hand to push the side of the pit, and it helped a little, but he did not have the strength to lift them both out.

"Elle, *pull...*" he yelled in the enclosed tunnel.

He felt her grip his legs and pull. Their combined strength pulled them both up. The hand on him shifted to then grab the back of his pants and in seconds more they popped out like a cork from a bottle.

Elle was standing over them, flare in her hand, and as soon as Anne came free the spider boiled out in a fury to reclaim its prize.

"*Ha!*" Like a fencer, Elle stabbed forward with the burning flare into its many-eyed face, causing it to snap back down into its burrow.

Anne cried and clung to him, shaking uncontrollably. Troy looked up at Elle.

"Thank you."

She nodded, her eyes going from him to the bag that was hanging around his neck. "Just protecting my investment." She flat smiled. "We're not out of danger yet. Let's go."

Troy nodded, thinking her graveyard humour was a little out of place. But then guessed they all were on edge right now.

He looked back at Anne. "Okay?" He wiped dirt from her tear-streaked face. "Can you walk?"

"To get out of here, I'll damn sprint on broken legs." She stood, but her leg buckled a little. She felt it and her hand came away with some blood. "Thankfully, no venom, just a couple of deep punctures." She nodded. "I can do it."

Troy held her hand and then together they joined Elle and ran on into the forest. And though it wasn't the way they entered, Troy hoped that the direction they headed was leading them back to the shoreline.

It had taken them many hours to reach Odin's house, but then they trekked, and now they ran hard. Troy worried that in their blind run they would blunder into some sort of deadly trouble. Especially as around them there was no sound of pursuit anymore, and the forest was quiet except for the panting of the humans as they smashed

through the undergrowth.

"Slow down," Anne hissed. "There'll be nocturnal raptors and I don't think we're far from where Lars was taken," she added.

It immediately brought them all to a halt. The trio sucked in air, but adrenaline kept their hearts beating like drums in their chests.

"Where's Tygo and Ord?" Anne asked.

"Who cares?" Troy asked. "They can rot here as far as I'm concerned. We get to the boats and bug out."

"We leave them?" Elle asked.

"Sure we do," Anne replied. "You think they wouldn't do that to us?" Anne squeezed her punctured leg again and winced. She looked up. "And hey, thanks for your help back there."

Elle shook her head. "I was panicking. Sorry, I didn't see you."

"Yeah right, you looked right at me." Anne's gaze was flat. "You damn saw me." Anne narrowed her eyes.

Troy took out the ruby and held it up. "We get this back, we're all set for life."

"We've got to get back first," Anne said. "And also be first back to the boats."

"We've still got at least half a day's travel to go. We have the eye – we just need to use it to reverse travel," Troy replied. "Those other bumbling wannabe Viking idiots will be wandering around in the dark until some dino picks them off."

Anne shrugged. "Fine with me."

"No, we need to find them," Elle insisted.

Troy shook his head. "No, we don't. Remember what they did to your brother."

"I know. But we're not leaving them here; it would be, *ah*, inhumane," Elle pressed.

Troy scoffed. "Inhumane? What is wrong with you? They killed your younger brother, and also Jorgan in cold blood."

"I know." Elle nodded slowly and then sighed. "But they were fated to die."

Troy frowned, not understanding what she meant. "What did...?"

Elle pulled the gun. "I can't leave them."

"What?" Troy frowned. "What's going on, Elle?"

"I knew it," Anne seethed. "She left me on purpose. I knew there was a reason I couldn't trust this bitch."

Troy turned. "Anne, don't..." He turned back to Elle. "I don't understand what's going on here. Please tell me."

"It'll soon become clear." Elle held out her hand. "Give me the ruby, Troy. Now."

Troy was stunned. He stood staring at Elle. Even her face looked different – the expression harder and more resolute.

“Why?” was all he could ask.

“I need it.” She pointed the gun at his chest. “Don’t make this go bad. You’re a nice guy; you got us here and I doubt anyone else could have. But your work is done now.” She pointed with the gun. “And the eye.”

“No,” he said.

“I’m sorry you think I’m not serious,” she replied emotionlessly.

Troy saw her jaw set, and she turned the gun to Anne, and he saw her trigger finger flex.

“No!” He dived just as she fired, pushing Anne out of the way.

The bullet hit him in the meat of the shoulder, spinning him around. Anne immediately covered him with her body as Elle aimed again. Anne quickly grabbed the ruby from his backpack and rolled it along the ground toward Elle’s feet.

“Thank you, bitch.” Elle smiled and lifted the ruby. But then looked back. “Oh, and I said I want the eye as well.”

Troy groaned and removed the eye. He tossed it to her, and she expertly caught it.

“Why?” Troy said between groans.

“You have only lived one life and would never understand.” Elle held the huge, red stone up and stared into its depths. “And I have searched for this prize for a thousand years.”

She then pointed the gun from Anne to Troy. “You were a good guy, and because of that I won’t kill you.” She then pointed the gun at Anne. “But I really don’t like you. One more word and you’re dead.”

She held the gun on them for another moment, and then slowly backed away and the jungle closed around her. In another second she had vanished.

CHAPTER 35

The pair continued to watch the forest where she left, with Troy fully expecting her to return, and what, apologise?

"She's gone," Anne said and sat Troy up. "I knew it."

"I don't understand," he said.

"She played you. Played us all." Anne pulled his shirt across. She slid her night vision goggles down and quickly scanned the forest and then reached into her kit.

"But her brothers. I didn't..." He was confused, and hurt more by Elle's double cross than by his wound.

"Didn't what? See it coming? I know, she was good. And obviously a psycho," Anne scoffed. "Hold still."

Anne bathed the wound with water. "Just glanced you. Lucky she's a crap shot." She then applied a splash of iodine to disinfect the wound and also to try to overpower the rich smell of fresh blood. She then squirted some antibiotic powder to clog the bleeding, and finally slapped a compress and tape over it. She dragged his shirt back over the wound.

"That's going to hurt like hell. But it'll be worse tomorrow when it swells. Then you'll have reduced motion," she said.

Troy nodded. "Thanks." He groaned as he got to his feet and rotated his shoulder. "Yeah, just the meat, but I'll be okay." He half smiled. "But my ego will never heal."

"Good," she laughed softly. "You only had good taste in women when you dated me. And now, we need to move. And fast," she said. "If that bitch gets to the boats before we do, she'll strand us."

"She wouldn't dare," Troy replied.

Anne rounded on him. "Are you shitting me, Troyson Strom?" Anne grabbed his shirt front. "She allowed her brothers to be killed, just shot you, robbed you, and walked away with a smile on her face."

"Okay, okay." He rubbed his face with one greasy hand.

Anne turned back to the dark forest. "But which way? She's got the eye, and now we're the two bumbling fools wandering around in the dark with a half day's travel before we even get to the coast."

Troy pointed the way Elle went. "Just as well I have a great sense of direction." He chuckled. "I suggest we try and track Elle. She doesn't have a huge head start. Yet." He turned about. "We also look out for our markings on the trees and any landmarks we recognise ." He shrugged. "It's all we got."

Anne nodded. "We go quiet and pray we don't run into any night predators."

Troy grabbed her hand and lifted it to kiss its back. "Thank you.

And sorry; I'm not usually this dumb."

"Yes, you are." She softly slapped his face. "And you can thank me by getting me home."

"Ready?" he asked. Anne nodded, and then the pair began to run through the dark forest.

Troy was relying on luck as right now they had to trade speed for risk, as they plunged through the primordial jungle on the mysterious island.

CHAPTER 36

Troy led the way, but slowed, and then stopped, also stopping Anne.

“What is it?” she asked.

“This doesn’t look right to me.” He turned about.

The forest was thicker here and tending to be more like rainforest jungle. Beneath their feet the ground was becoming marshy, and the mist was heavier as the humidity rose. It was even warmer.

“I don’t recognise any of this. It’s not even the same type of rainforest,” he said.

“You’re right.” She looked around. “Should we double back?”

Troy looked up; the sky above them was totally black and devoid of stars due to the ice ceiling above a layer of mist and it still being night-time. But even when it was day, there was no sun to guide them, as it was nothing but white.

“Maybe I should climb a tree,” he said. “Try and see where the coastline is.”

“You just got shot, remember?” Anne frowned.

Troy rolled his shoulder. “Feels fine. And I better do it while I still have the energy and mobility.”

She scoffed. “Listen, Troy, if that wound starts to bleed, you’ll be ringing the dinner bell on both of us.”

He felt it, and judged it painful, but okay. “I’ll be careful, I promise, Mommy.”

She grinned. “Idiot.”

She then looked about and spotted a huge banyan-like tree that had a trunk about fifty feet around, plus hanging roots creating a draping curtain look as it spread over the forest floor. It grew huge and high into the air with its upper branches just touching the mist layer. But the upside was its bottom branches radiated from low down making for an easy climb.

“That one.” She pointed. “Some sort of ancient Ficus – old, strong, and tall. Its thick limbs mean you should be able to clamber out and see above the tree canopy.”

Troy looked up. “Yeah, doable.”

Together they walked closer to the trunk. Troy took off his pack and handed it to her.

“I’ll stay below the mist line,” he said.

He looked up, planning his pathway, going from limb to limb. The upper branches were cloaked in thick leaves, but he felt confident. He still had the gun tucked into his pants, his night vision goggles were up on his forehead for now, and he also had his long blade. It was all

he hoped he'd need.

"Don't be long. It's creepy as hell down here." Anne gave him a weak smile.

"That's the plan." He walked toward a huge limb as broad around as an elephant that had a curtain of hanging roots touching and burying themselves into the ground. He lay a hand on it, still looking up.

"And don't forget your gloves," she said in a rush as she quickly rummaged through his backpack.

"Good thinking." He held out his hands, and she slapped a pair of dark gloves into them – they were covered in a toughened rubber on the back, but flexible on the inside for grip.

He pulled them on and strapped them, then looked up again. "Here goes." He began his climb.

It was easy to begin with as the limbs were broad and close together meaning he had a wide and dry platform to scale. It only took him around ten minutes to get fifty feet in the air and glancing down he could still see Anne looking up at him.

It was growing lighter now as dawn must have been approaching, and the mist ceiling above was beginning to glow. It was still dark on the ground, but he bet within the hour they'd have enough light to feel a little safer.

He continued climbing – he was still in the centre of the canopy level of the forest and didn't have a view yet, but as he scaled, it became damper, and he began to enter the lowest layer of mist hanging in the air.

It was just on climbing for 45-minutes that he saw that he had risen above the other trees, and then chose a limb to work his way a little further out.

Troy moved past the thick branches and began to see more light. Underfoot the limbs got a little thinner but were still around a foot in diameter so easily able to take his weight, and there were upright branches for him to hold onto.

Clouds of mist wove in and out of the limbs at this level. Sometimes he had good vision, and other times, he had to wait for a particularly thick cloud to pass through the tree.

Troy was sure he heard a soft murmur, and at first, he had this insane thought that Anne had followed him up. He turned back to the main trunk but saw nothing. And there was also nothing further out, on his branch, or below him.

He looked upward, and got a brief shock as there on an upper branch was what his brain told him were three undertakers. The three shapes looked like tall men in dark overcoats with their arms folded in tight around their bodies.

Troy squinted – three undertakers just waiting for him to fall so

they could measure him up for a nice coffin.

Another thick mist cloud passed through the tree, and he heard the murmur again, and when the cloud cleared, his undertakers were gone, and he was alone.

He scoffed and shook his head. *Undertakers*, he thought. *Talk about a foreboding vision.*

“Hold it together, buddy,” Troy whispered to himself.

He looked up again – the mist was still drifting lazily above him, and he could make out a glassine glint of something through it, which he assumed might have been ice crystals. He couldn’t judge how much further it was above him and whether it was a hundred feet or a thousand.

His shoulder ached and felt sticky, and he saw blood seeping through his shirt. Anne would kill him, he thought. But there was no pain, so he ignored it.

Nearly done, he thought and moved further out along the limb. And then did a double take – in amongst the curtains of mist he thought he saw something gliding through it like a small airplane.

Maybe the morning light had roused something – it was naïve of him to assume there wouldn’t be some sort of avian life living on this mysterious island. After all, there were birds everywhere, on every continent and island in the world. Even in subterranean places, there were other creatures that had learned to fly like bats and lizards.

Troy edged out a little further, eager to get it over with now. He was about as far as he could go, while retaining his balance. The land was just lighting and he was about fifty feet above the other taller trees with just a few like his dotted about.

He looked around slowly. The island was huge, with a small mountain in the distance with what looked like they might have been caves. There were heavily forested areas, and broad plains. He could make out the line of forest creasing and separating which probably indicated a good-sized river running between them, and much larger than the one they had crossed.

There were also strange areas that were devoid of plants that made a path about fifty feet wide. He took a few extra steps, and then saw that the forest ended just to what he assumed was his west. And there was the dark water beyond – their goal, the coast.

He wished he had a pair of binoculars and turned in the direction he thought they had come – he couldn’t quite make out the building that was Odin’s house, but there was another massive tree bigger than all others, that might have been the one embracing it.

Further out again, he could swear there were more structures, but if they were, then built by who? The Vikings? he wondered. Or maybe some even older race.

Troy took one last look to get his bearings on their destination – there was some thick forest and an unusual barren area at its centre, like a wound. But just past it lay the coast and he estimated about six, maybe worst case, seven hours of travel time remaining if they kept a good speed and didn't get attacked.

He'd seen enough, turned away and began to move along the branch. But then something hurtled out of the mist to land on his back and cling there with dagger-like claws. It forced him down onto the branch where he scrambled to hang on even as his boots slipped.

He swung an elbow back at the thing, connecting with something heavy and he half turned to see a long face that darted forward, trying to get at his eyes. Leathery wings enfolded him, and once again the claws moved to pierce his body somewhere else, as all the jostling threatened to throw him off his perch.

Troy had no choice but to go on the attack. He spun and held on with his legs. Momentarily his belly was exposed, but he shot a hand up and grabbed the end of a snout that had teeth embedded all the way along the outside edge of a foot-and-a-half long set of strong jaws that was like a beak.

It squawked and shook violently, but Troy held on. He was glad Anne had told him to wear his toughened gloves as the creature would have shredded his bare skin. Tiny red eyes almost glowed with fury as it desperately tried to shake his hand off.

"Don't like that, *huh?*"

He saw it clearly now – it was large, about seven feet tall or long, and with a wingspan that must have been an easy fifteen feet. But from a mass perspective, he bet he outweighed it by 30-pounds.

"You're lucky I don't kill you." He let it go and then used his other fist to punch it in the side of the head. "So, piss off."

The thing screamed and flapped upright but didn't fly away and instead landed further out along his branch to just glare back at him.

Troy looked down at his shredded shirt with multiple blood spots. "You bastard," he muttered. He turned away to begin his climb down and came face to face with another of them. This one folded up in its undertaker guise.

"Oh great."

He knew he had the measure of a single one of the things, but a flock of the giant flying meat eaters was too much, and he knew they'd overwhelm him if they all attacked him at once.

Balanced where he was, he had few options – fight, flight, or both. He drew his knife just as a shadow passed over him. As another of the creatures was about to land on him, he stabbed backwards, and this time his blade bit into the leathery belly that was covered in a downy sort of fur or feather.

The thing screamed but immediately unwrapped its wings from him and flapped awkwardly away like a broken kite in a strong breeze.

As more of the avian creatures landed, Troy knew it was time to go. He glanced down, and then without another thought, dived. His goal was the branch about eight feet below him, but he had been off balance and missed the larger limb and instead only grabbed one of the skinny branches sticking up from the main bough.

It broke and he kept on going down. “Ah, shit.”

Troy plummeted down another twenty feet before thumping heavily onto a lower tree branch. It knocked the wind out of him, and his knife bounced away. He hoped Anne was out of the way.

He clung to the huge limb for a few moments, sucking in deep breaths and waiting for his heart to slow. But then remembered the danger and quickly looked above him – there was no sign of pursuit from the undertakers. And after another moment he sat up, feeling his chest – no broken ribs from the impact, but sore as hell and with the amount of abrasions, cuts, and bruises, he knew he’d be a basket case tomorrow.

Troy then carefully scaled down, constantly looking up and along the branches to ensure he wasn’t being followed, or he’d stumble onto some other arboreal creature that was having a nap or waiting to ambush him.

In about ten minutes more he leapt from the last branch to the ground to then sit with his back against the huge trunk resting his forearms on his knees with his head down.

Anne was waiting for him and held out his knife.

“Here we go, butter fingers,” she tsk-tsked. “It nearly stabbed me, you know.”

“Knocked out of my hand.” He took the knife. “The flying undertakers. Did you not...?”

“The what?” she asked. “Did you hit your head?”

“Just forget it.” He held out a hand for her to help him to his feet. “Next time you do the climbing, okay?”

“Sure.” She smiled, but then her face dropped. “Hey, you’re bleeding again. And in other places. Stay where you are.”

She grabbed the medical kit, peeled off his shirt, and frowned at the punctures and lacerations. “Were there thorns?”

“Yeah, flying ones,” he grimaced.

“You told me, flying undertakers.” She dressed his new wounds and changed the bandage on his shoulder. “You’re a wreck, Mr. Troyson Strom.”

“I feel it.” Troy got his bearings. “Okay, there’s a shorter route of about six miles.” He pointed. “That way. But rough terrain, so I estimate up to five hours, less if we run, and also depending on what

we bump into.”

“Sounds good.” She already had a couple of protein bars in her other hand and she handed him one. “Eat something.”

He suddenly remembered he was starving and took the bar, ripped off the foil and demolished it in a few bites. She took two bites of hers and gave him the rest.

She sat and watched him eat, and then tilted her head. “So, tell me.”

“*Hmm?*” He turned to her.

“Why did you really leave me?” Her face reddened a little. “I thought we were just getting our groove on.”

He chuckled. “Now? You want to talk about that now that we’re in the middle of a prehistoric jungle, on a lost island, with carnivorous creatures everywhere. Now is a good time?”

She smiled. “Sure, seems like it, and I have your undivided attention.”

“You’re unbelievable.” He laughed softly, and then faced her. “Yeah, we were getting our groove on. But I had lots to do – trying to save my business, which didn’t work out, and well, you know how I am with commitment.”

She exhaled through her nose. “You know what? Your problem is that you chase the wrong things.” She sniffed.

“Story of my life,” he sighed.

“Well, I’ll tell you one thing,” she smiled up at him, “I can’t promise I won’t shoot you, and boy did I dream of doing that.” She raised her eyebrows. “But I can promise I’ll never double cross you.”

He laughed. “Honour is your middle name.”

“It’s Shauna, actually. But honour will do.” She peeled back his shirt and took one last look at his shoulder. “Stopped bleeding. So we better get moving.” She left her hand on him. “And you know what my problem is? It’s that I still think you’re pretty cool. Even though you can be an ass.”

“That’s the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me.” He grabbed her head and pulled it forward to kiss her greasy, dirt-streaked forehead. “Now, let’s move.”

CHAPTER 37

Elle stopped and eased behind a tree as the bushes moved not fifty feet in front of her. As she watched, her mouth spread in a smile and she shook her head as Tygo and Ord emerged. The pair were covered in scratches, and their torn clothing hung from them.

She stepped out. "You must have the luck of Odin to still be alive."

The men spun at her with guns drawn. But on seeing her, Tygo began to laugh. "And who is it that looks out for you, my princess?" he frowned and looked about. "And where are your faithful companions?"

"I left them on the trail, one with a bullet in him. Where they'll stay until something finds and eats them." Elle approached.

"Ruthless, as ever." Tygo chuckled, and then held his hands wide. "The heart?"

She reached into her bag and lifted out the huge gem. "Must I do everything myself?"

Ord clapped once and looked skyward before whooping. Tygo came and took the stone and bent forward to kiss her.

"My Brynhilde, truly you are magnificent." He held it in one hand as he stared down into her face. "You played your part well. And everything went to plan."

"Your plan." She smiled up into his broad face.

Tygo grunted and then turned to the huge stone. "A prize fit for a king."

"My chieftain, it is a prize fit for our long wandering souls. They cried out for it." Elle looked up at him, her single green eye almost glowing. "But we'll enjoy it more when we're a long way from here." She held up the dragon finder on her palm – it swivelled but didn't point back at Odin's home, but instead at the huge ruby.

"*Ach*, I hoped we could use it to backtrack to find the boat." She lowered her hand. "Useless now." She let it drop to the ground and looked up at the Viking. "Guess your seafaring skills will come in handy."

"We'll find the boat." He held up the stone. "Because Odin is now with us."

Elle set off followed by Ord and Tygo, who held the huge gem in one large hand and continued to stare into its depths as if mesmerised.

Elle walked behind Tygo and in front of Ord. She reached out a hand and let it trail over a string of vines that were hung with small white flowers. She felt a connection with this mysterious and magical island, and though she had never set foot here, it was as if everything

was familiar to her.

Even as a child, she had a sense of a spirit within her that belonged to a former time. Later she had consulted a Nordic spiritualist who drew forth the presence, confirming what she felt in her soul – it was a Viking woman named Brynhilde – who was destined to meet the reincarnation of Ulf Skarsgard, a great chieftain, but one who had become lost in the mists of time, and vanished from history.

Then as a child she had seen the shard of pottery in the museum and learned of the chieftain's lost voyage to a hidden island. It was then fated for her to meet Vissen Tygo, and once that happened, everything fell into place.

Her brothers, Elrik and Bjorn, and Jorgan, Troyson Strom, and even the pathetic woman from the museum, were all vehicles to get her here. She felt nothing for any of them, as her story was written long before they were born.

Elle placed a hand on Tygo's back and he turned to smile at her. The plan now was to get Odin's heart back home. Then plan a larger mission to retrieve some of the treasure, with more formidable weaponry.

She smiled; they would live like a king and queen. Like Brynhilde and Ulf never had a chance to do.

CHAPTER 38

“Sulphur,” Anne said and lifted her head, sniffing some more.

“I smell it,” Troy replied. “I thought Greenland was geologically stable, so no volcanos.”

“It is as it’s a very old land mass, and quite stable. But it’s impossible to know for sure as the ice is so thick in some areas, many miles, that the scientists can’t get clear readings.” She looked up. “It could be what’s keeping this place from freezing over.”

The pair continued through the forest that was becoming ever more dense. There were no trails now, and in some patches, they needed to snake through areas of thick palm frond, ropy vines with sticky, glistening sap, and also skirt around stands of tall and hairy looking trees with pompom heads of grass at their tops.

Anne got a cloth from her bag and wrapped it around her lower face, and after a few minutes more Troy did the same as the smell of volcanic gases got even thicker around them.

In moments more their path ended at the dead zone Troy had seen from the treetop. And at its centre was a massive rip in the ground. Gas lazily wafted up from its depths and deep down in the rift there was a soft glow. Troy looked about and saw on several sides there were massive pathways as the plant life had been flattened, and the larger rocks even looked to have been polished. Then he spotted something else that put him immediately on alert.

He grabbed her. “Anne, get down.” The pair crouched. “two o’clock, do you see what I see?”

Anne followed where he indicated. And then saw it. “Oh shit.”

About 200-feet from them was the massive, severed head of the carnosaur. The car-sized skull was staring vacantly just past them, and the neck looked melted in some places, rather than ripped or bitten through.

“The *drekka*, the dragon,” Troy whispered.

“Is this where it lives?” she asked.

As if in answer there came a grinding, scraping noise like something monstrously heavy being dragged across rocks.

“Back, back.” Troy held Anne’s arm and together they crept back to a lone tree and lay down behind it.

From the massive rip in the earth the head of the *drekka* appeared. It paused, its giant slit-pupil eyes moving over the landscape, and then it spotted the head – a forgotten morsel maybe. It dragged itself further out, and then opened its mouth, ejecting a stream of sticky looking slime that boiled when it covered the dinosaur’s head.

The skull began to steam and soften and then collapsed. The *drekka*

then reached forward to grab the half ton of melting meat and bone in its jaws and pulverised the morsel in a squelch of splattering meat and brains, and then gulped it down.

“When the gates of Hell open, the first beast through will be the leviathan,” Anne whispered.

“And we just barged into its home,” Troy replied.

Troy couldn’t help but stare as the creature was a true titan and was bigger than anything that had ever lived on the planet. It looked as ancient as the rocks and soil, and he wondered whether it was the only one or down in that ravine there were more of them, or maybe a clutch of eggs each the size of small cars.

It pulled itself up and out of the steaming rift, and they could feel the vibrations from its movement right up through the ground as its bulk scraped the rocks and earth.

Anne and Troy flattened themselves even more, and hoped that the overpowering smell of methane, sulphur, and the remains of the melted head of the carnosaur would mask their scent.

In seconds more the dragon heaved itself into the forest and mighty banyans were moved from its path. As it went, for many minutes its colossal back was still visible at the treetops.

The pair continued watching where it went for a while longer until they couldn’t feel or hear it anymore.

Anne got to her feet. “I need some proof of this.” She walked a little closer to the edge of the ravine.

“How? How does it make the hot liquid come from inside it?” Troy asked.

“It’s not so unique.” Anne quickly looked about and headed for where the dinosaur skull had been. She slowed just before a pool of the drekka saliva that still had steam rising from the ground. The plants covered had been turned to liquid and even the soil was discoloured.

“It’s obviously a biological chemical reaction.” She looked about and found a small stick and returned to crouch beside it. Troy stood beside her, trying to keep watch but fascinated by what Anne was telling him.

“There are reptiles, like the spitting cobra, that use their fangs to spray venom. The snakes do this by squeezing the muscles around the venom glands. They’re frighteningly accurate, and for something so small from a range of 6 feet, they are 90 percent on-target at directing the venom spray to the victim’s eyes. Gets in the eyes, the victim is blinded.”

She turned to look up at him. “Its venom is a neurotoxin, meaning it acts on the nervous system. If you’re unlucky enough to get some cobra venom in your mouth people say that it has a bitter taste, which

indicates it's an acid."

She swiped the stick through the mucous and held it up. Steam came from the stick and the end began to soften and droop like warming wax.

"But it's hot," Troy pointed out. "It's not just acid, but physically hot."

Anne brought her free hand closer to the stick, palm up, and nodded. "Yeah, I can feel it. But that too has a precedent in the animal kingdom. There's a bug called a bombardier beetle that has the ability to shoot heated chemicals from their abdomen. In fact, it's a mix of chemical and boiling water." She half turned. "There are two glands at the tip of the abdomen. Each gland has hydrogen peroxide and an acid reservoir. When threatened, it squeezes the contents of the reservoir into a special internal mixing chamber filled with water and enzymes. A chemical reaction results, heating the water to 212 degrees Fahrenheit. Then it points its ass at you, squeezes, and bingo..." she held up the melted stick. "...you've just been cooked alive."

"If these massive creatures always had the ability to do this, then it's obviously where the legends of fire breathing dragons came from," he remarked.

"I think you're right." She tossed the now wilted stick aside. "It's strange, because the fire breathing dragon legend was in English, Scandinavian, Chinese, and many more cultures. Maybe they experienced them sometime or somewhere before. Maybe they were prevalent in the world at some point in our distant history."

Anne stood and walked closer to the ravine edge and stared down. "Am I the only one who wants to see what's down there?"

Troy went and grabbed her. "Yes, you are, Anne. You're the only one. Now let's go."

It took them only two more hours to reach the shoreline, and Anne reached forward to grab his arm to slow him down. She put a finger to her lips and then cupped her ear.

Troy stopped and listened – then he heard it – Elle's voice, and worse, her laughter. He felt the pang of betrayal all over again.

That bitch, Anne mouthed.

"Get down," Troy whispered.

The pair sunk down into the leaf litter, and Troy immediately saw something on the ground. He frowned, not knowing what it meant, but then slowly guessed. He grabbed it and stuffed it in his pocket and looked back to the waterline.

They were about a hundred yards further up the beach from where the sound of voices came from and when they peered through the line of trees and hanging fern fronds, they saw Elle and Tygo already sitting in one of the inflatables.

But where was Ord? And where was Sven who was left to mind the boats? he wondered.

Then Tygo yelled something, and Ord's voice came back, even further down the beach. Troy and Anne inched forward and peered out just in time to see Sven plunging a dagger into the side of one of the spare boats and then ripping backwards, opening a huge rent in its side. The tough frame immediately began to sag.

While he did this Ord was grabbing things from the boat and tossing them out into the dark water – all their spare supplies.

The pair then walked toward the last boat.

“Those bastards. They’ll maroon us,” Troy seethed. “*Hey you...*” he yelled.

“*Troy. Stop!*” Anne lunged at him, but too late, as Troy was already out in the open.

CHAPTER 39

Sven and Ord turned, and Sven then said something to his companion, who nodded and began to fast walk back to Troy. Sven then simply went back to his task of ruining the last boat.

Troy's fury was unbound as he started to run down the beach. Ord had pulled his handgun, while behind he heard Tygo guffaw, but also start the engine on their boat.

Ord pointed his gun, but Troy pulled his own weapon from the back of his pants. Ord's eyes went a fraction wider at seeing the unexpected weapon. They went wider still when he found out Troy was faster and a better shot.

Ord fired and missed. And by then Troy had already shot twice in quick succession. Both bullets punched into the man's forehead, throwing his head back like he had been kicked by a mule and splattering brains and blood back over the sand.

Sven, on seeing Troy had a weapon and his proficiency with it, decided on a change of his own plans – he ran and fired as he sprinted back toward Tygo's boat.

Troy dived under the spray of bullets, rolled, and brought his gun up. The single round he fired went in one of the big man's ears, but never came out. The bullet was probably pin-balling around in his thick skull and turning his brain to mush.

Sven fell like a tree into the water.

Troy was up on his feet and running hard at the remaining boat. But by then, Tygo and Elle had obviously seen enough, and while Elle yelled instructions, Tygo held the ruby in one hand and the motor's engine stick with the other.

Troy ran down the sand. He knew he could have holed the boat, but then if he did that how could they escape with no boats at all? And he damn well wanted that boat.

He needed them to turn around. And he needed to give them a reason to do that. So Troy stopped, planted his legs, held the gun in two hands and aimed carefully – he fired once, and the bullet hit its target – Tygo's hand that was holding the huge gem.

The big man's hand flicked backward, releasing the stone which flipped through the air and then promptly went over the side and into the dark water. Tygo screamed in pain and fury and looked over the side of the boat and into the depths.

"Turn back, or you're next," Troy yelled, pointing the gun at Elle.

They disregarded him, so Troy waded into the water, ignoring whatever might be lurking there. He knew he could swim to their boat in under a minute, and with Tygo wounded, he had a good chance of

getting the boat back.

“Troy!” Anne screamed.

He was chest deep and turned, and then felt a chill run right up his spine. A few hundred yards down the beach, the monstrous dragon’s head was emerging from the forest.

Troy looked from the monster to the boat, and then to Anne, who was waving him back. He had two choices, swim out to the boat and fight for it, drawing the attention of the monster. Or return to her.

He chose. Troy surged out of the water, running up the sand to Anne. Behind him he heard Elle yell something in Danish while Tygo still screamed his frustration at the dropped gem. But then the boat restarted, and the pair headed out towards the cave mouth leading to the outside world.

Troy and Anne sprinted into the forest, dived to the ground, and turned to watch. The massive drekka came out of the forest, fast, and headed into the water as the sound and movement of the boat drew its attention.

Troy and Anne watched as the boat got smaller and smaller and then vanished into the cave.

The drekka didn’t slow and began to swim, looking like a moving island. But as the sound of the boat receded to nothing the massive beast stopped at the cave mouth. It roared once into the dark cave with a noise like thunder, as if issuing a warning to the small irritating creatures. Then it turned away to swim slowly along the towering cliff wall and down the coast away from them.

Anne and Troy waited a moment more and Anne sat up and leaned back against a tree. Troy sat up next to her, but his head was down, as he couldn’t believe what had just happened.

“Those bastards,” he whispered.

Anne rubbed his back. “I told you she’d break your heart.”

Troy snorted softly and then nodded, remembering Anne saying it. He also remembered him not believing it.

He sighed and leaned back. “Well, that’s that then.”

“Now what do we do?” she asked.

Troy thought about the question – they had whatever was in their packs and what was left in the remains of the inflatable that hadn’t been tossed out into the water. He wondered whether they could repair it – find some tree with sticky sap and...

He scoffed. Even if they did, it would never be seaworthy enough to make it in the freezing waters and then the hundreds of miles back to port. Without the Arctic Princess, it’d be suicide.

But he had an idea. “We learn to live off the land, find or make shelter.”

“Tarzan and Jane, *huh?*” She half smiled. “But I can help. I’ve got

enough biology experience to know what's edible or not." She exhaled and turned to him. "But for how long? Is this our life now?"

He faced her. "No. For now, we stay alive," he said. "And we wait."

"For what?" she asked.

"For when they come back," he said.

"Come back?" Her brows went up.

"Sure. They'll have to come back, and soon, for the ruby. That big dumb asshole thinks it is his birthright to own it," he chuckled. "There's no way he'll leave it behind now that he knows it's real. And where it is."

"And we'll be ready," she said. "But..." She looked out over the dark water. "They don't even need to set foot on land and can just moor out in the water and retrieve the stone from there."

Troy reached into his pack and pulled out the single pair of goggles Anne had packed for them. "Not if we retrieve it first."

She laughed and shook her head. "You're going to dive in the dark water, when we already know there are huge carnivorous creatures in there? You are one madman, Troyson Strom."

She stood and walked a few paces toward the water and then squinted out over its calm surface. "I can't even remember where it was dropped now." She looked back at him. "How in the world are you going to find it? Quickly. Because every second spent in there, you're risking a grizzly death." She turned, half smiling. "And worse, leaving me alone."

Troy reached into his pocket and pulled out what he had found amongst the leaves – the green eye.

"The dragon finder," Anne whispered. "You think what it really points to is Odin's heart."

"Let's see." He held it out on his palm, and sure enough, it swivelled to point out at a direction in the water. "Yeah, we'll find it. And we'll be ready."

"We'll make it home." She put a hand on his shoulder. "After all, if Ulf Skarsgard made it out, then so can we."

EPILOGUE

Fear not death for the hour of your doom is set and none may escape it
~ Völsunga saga, old Norse translation, 13th century.

Year of 1020 – Eastern Greenland – last voyage of the Skidbladnir

“Row. Row for your life!” Ulf bellowed.

The roar from behind them boomed out from the stygian dark of the cave, and the men’s hands bled as they dragged on the oars. Even though they were more fatigued than they had ever been in their lives, fear drove them on ever harder.

They only had half their oarsmen now and it meant the *Skidbladnir* was sluggish in the water with less muscle on the wood. They sorely missed Sten, the stone face, Arne, of the eagle eyes, and Brynhilde, the female giantess and the master of their sister boat. And all the rest of them lost to the horrors beyond Odin’s Gate.

Even Ulf Skarsgard, their chieftain, rowed and he roared at them to pull till their backs broke and their hearts burst. Only old Frode was excused from duties as the stump on the end of his arm was swaddled in blood-soaked cloth that glistened as it still bled. The mutilated hand had needed to be cut away where the flesh had been melted to the bone.

In the crook of the old warrior’s remaining good arm, comforting him, he still held his urn, finished now, and the magnificent piece of pottery was decorated in runes and pictures, and he gripped it harder than a new mother holds her first born. It told the tale of Ulf and their journey, and the path they took to find Lemuria, the mysterious island of legend.

Ulf gritted his teeth as they crossed the hidden sea and left the island behind. They headed towards the cave that became a long corridor of ice and as they did the cold bit down on them and their breath steamed in the frigid air. After so many days in the warmth of the land beyond Odin’s Gate, no man felt the discomfort of the cold’s teeth, and only recognised it as a blessed promise of escape.

Ulf looked back into the dark void of the cave – he thanked Odin for the glimpse of his mysterious island – they left behind a place of monstrous beasts, and swamps, and horrors, and mythic tales come to life, and as Ulf dragged on his oar, he finally felt a mustard seed of hope that they all may live to tell the tale.

The roar came again, even closer; the great beast was gaining on them. Ulf took one hand from his oar to grip his battle axe. He stared back into the yawning maw of the cave but could see nothing

following them, and he urged the men on to even greater effort.

They passed through the narrow valley of ice whose walls touched the sky; soon they would be in open ocean, he prayed. But then, another roar, this time so loud and close they felt the vibrations of its tenor jar their bones and smash along the ice valley they moved within.

Ulf dragged ever harder and his hands on the oar grew sticky with blood as blisters, already burst, now rubbed down to raw flesh.

He looked up to the *Skidbladnir's* dragon's head prow. The green eye, the *drekafinnari*, rolled as if it were a living thing, looking back to where they had escaped from, perhaps demanding they return it to its home.

But there would be no chance of that as from all around them the roar continued, even louder, deeper, and then the chieftain realised it wasn't a beast's roar he heard but the deep crack of thick ice.

Ulf slowly looked up and his heart sank. "Odin's beard," he whispered.

The great walls of the ice valley cracked and split like bolts of white lightning running up through their blue edifices.

The Viking leader knew then that Odin called, and he released his oar and slowly stood as the world began to collapse in on them. He opened his arm's wide and tilted his head back. "Valhalla-aaa!" he roared as the walls of ice tumbled in on them with the sound of a thousand thunderstorms.

A few men leapt over the side into the freezing water, choosing one death over another, as the mountainous blocks rained down on the longboat. Others were crushed to the deck, and some were blown free, such as old Frode and his precious urn.

The *Skidbladnir* was blown apart, and Ulf, and the mouth of the cave, all vanished beneath millions of tons of ice and snow.

In minutes more the ice settled. And silence returned.

The seasons passed by. Then the decades. Then centuries.

Once again, the climate grew colder, and the ice pack extended out to eat more of the sea and bury the land under hundreds more feet of ice.

There would be other warming periods, great and small, but for now, Odin's Gate was closed and the legend of Lemuria, the mysterious island, would once more become just a whispered tale.

The End

Read on for a free sample of Quest For The Queen's Temple.



Chapter One

December 10, 1937

With the setting sun to his back, Cameron Cooper aimed his compass across the Arabian desert wasteland. He noted the azimuth and checked his map. Then he turned in the saddle of his camel to face the three Arab porters he'd hired in Sana'a.

"There we go," he announced. "Right on course."

The three dirty, bearded men wore the kind of loose billowy cloaks common to the Bedouin in the area. Each sat upon a camel laden with Cameron's expedition's remaining supplies. One man carried a rusty rifle that pre-dated the Great War. None of them responded to Cameron's statement.

"Well, you three ought to be bloody happy about this," Cameron muttered. "It's why we're out in this godforsaken desert to begin with."

Cameron wasn't even sure how much English the three understood. They certainly managed to understand enough English to negotiate a higher than normal pay rate for this trip from the city of Sana'a through the part of the Arabian Peninsula known as the Empty Quarter.

The naming of this land had been dead-on. The place was little more than a sea of shifting sands. Even the camels had made a slow go of crossing it. After days of travel, he'd seen

nothing new, and only his compass reading told him that he hadn't been traveling in a circle.

The men's lack of enthusiasm was better than the terrified responses Cameron had gotten from others he'd tried to recruit for this expedition. He was in search of the Temple of Awwam, the legendary repository of the treasury of the Queen of Sheba. But what to him was likely a pile of stone ruins, to the locals was a place of death, protected by mythical desert monsters. It took half their exorbitant pay up front to convince these three to accompany him to the spot he'd marked on his map.

So far, they'd encountered no fierce gargantuan beasts, or any animals at all. The nasty, spitting camels they'd ridden were the most dangerous creatures they'd come across in the desert. As soon as they found the temple, Cameron was ready to berate the hired help about their stupid superstitions.

Their lengthening shadows meant it was time to set up camp for the evening. Travel during this moonless night would be too dangerous in the desert's near-absolute darkness. He called a halt and gave the order to set up camp. The men dismounted and went to work on setting up tents.

"Stopping," he said to himself. "*That* they understand completely."

By the time the sky had shifted from blue, through purple, to black, the men had four tents set up around a central fire. Cameron didn't ask what they used for fuel, but the pervasive smell of dung gave him a pretty good idea. There was a good reason he'd passed on cooking any food over the flames. Beyond the firelight, the desert was black as ink, and filled with an unnerving, lifeless silence that Cameron was certain he'd never get used to.

On the other side of the fire, his hired men kept up an incomprehensible discussion in Arabic. But Cameron recognized the dismissive looks and derisive tone. As far as he was concerned, the locals didn't have to like him. They just had to get him to the temple.

From behind him came the soft sound of shifting sand. Cameron's ears perked up. He whipped his head around and stared out past his tent, but saw nothing.

Then from the opposite direction came the bray of a camel, soon joined by another. The men went silent and concern quickly lined their faces. Cameron had watched the men secure the beasts to stakes driven deep in the sand, and the last thing he needed was for the dumb animals to get agitated, pull up the stakes, and bolt into the night.

"One of you needs to see what is spooking the camels," he said.

All three looked at each other. None of them moved.

Cameron had never mastered their names. He pointed to the smallest of the three. "You! Go check on the damn camels."

The man looked to the other two for support. They looked away. He rose to his feet, shuffled off past the tents, and the darkness swallowed him.

A moment later, the man's scream pierced the night. Everyone around the campfire jumped to their feet. The cry devolved to a strangled gurgle, then stopped.

"Mahmoud?" the man with the old rifle called out. "Mahmoud?"

No answer came. The three instinctively turned their backs to the fire. The rifleman cycled the bolt of his gun and loaded a round into the chamber. The other Arab drew a short sword from a scabbard on his belt. Cameron felt defenseless. He pulled a pocketknife from his trousers and opened the stubby blade.

From the abyss beyond the tents, the night sounded like it exhaled. The low rumbling sound made Cameron shiver, though the air was far from cold. After the noise followed the coppery scent of fresh blood.

A chorus of camel screams sounded, followed by the muffled thuds of big padded feet against the sand. The animals had broken free. Whatever had silenced Mahmoud had sent panic through the beasts.

"The desert spirits of Awwam," the rifleman said. "We've trespassed on their land."

The other handler murmured a repeated quatrain in Arabic that sounded to Cameron uncomfortably like a prayer.

The rifleman stepped away from the fire in the direction of the camels. He brought the buttstock to his shoulder, then took slow, even steps away from the light and toward the obsidian void between and beyond the tents.

"Hey," Cameron said. "Where are you going? They're just camels. You can't leave us undefended."

Cameron really meant the man couldn't leave *him* undefended, depending on his piddly pocketknife.

The rifleman paused at the far end of the tent. Then suddenly he vanished. It was as if the blackness grew two huge arms, reached out, and enveloped him. The man let fly a muffled scream. But it was cut short by the sound of crunching bones and tearing flesh.

That was all the remaining handler could stand. He shrieked and bolted away from the fire in the opposite direction of the missing rifleman. He passed between two tents and disappeared into the night.

Sweat broke out on Cameron's face. His pounding heart thudded in his chest. He swiveled his head all about the camp looking for whatever lurked out in the desert, and at the same time hoping that he didn't see it.

Okay, he thought. Maybe this is my chance. Whatever got the rifleman will be distracted by the handler sprinting across the desert. If I go slow, and quiet, I can slip past the tents, get over to the camels, and get the hell out of here. The damn animals can run forty miles per hour. Even desert spirits can't catch that.

At least he hoped they couldn't.

He gripped his worthless knife so tight his knuckles turned white. He tiptoed across the sand, away from the warmth and light of the fire, and closer to the ominous gap beyond the tents. He made it to the far edge of the tent and paused.

Hot, fetid air blew across his face. It carried the stink of shredded flesh and torn organs. Then came a growl so deep it vibrated his gut. Cameron's bowels gurgled and the knife slipped from his grip.

A set of large, yellow eyes flared to life two feet in front of his face.

The onset of madness kept Cameron from experiencing the awful reality of the last moments he spent alive.

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